

RUNNING HEAD: LIBERATING THE READ-ALOUD

Liberating the Read-Aloud:

Supporting Teachers' Critical Literacy Practice Around Race, Ethnicity, and Equity

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### **Abstract**

This study followed the course of a professional development intervention to support kindergarten teachers in using a critical literacy approach to teach their students about race, ethnicity, and equity. The purpose of the design-based intervention, which took place in a diverse but somewhat racially segregated school district, was to empower students to critique discrimination, racism, and systems of inequity. The research itself aimed to gain insight into how and to what degree teacher-participants took on an anti-racist teaching role through participation in a collaborative professional learning community “study group.” The study that found that White participants employed many and various rationales to demarcate boundaries around what they were comfortable with and willing to teach. Despite White participants’ ambitious goals for societal change through shaping student attitudes, their avoidance and resistance limited the curriculum they ultimately taught. Implications of the study include the importance of balancing consciousness-raising and White racial identity development efforts with anti-racist classroom actions for White teacher education. Additionally, the process of conducting this study shed light on ways to improve the intervention for future iterations.

*Keywords: early childhood, professional development, race, ethnicity, equity, White racial identity development*

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“Well, kids who have darker skin sometimes come from places that have less than others.”

--Margo's kindergarten student, January 2018

“Sometimes Brown people have a tough life because people judge them for their skin.”

“After Martin Luther King it was better, but some people still don't get it.”

--Anne's kindergarten students, May 2018

## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

I stood on my school's playground, shivering. My colleague, Sarah, also a pre-kindergarten teacher, and I were stuffed into our heavy winter coats. We were talking about our experiences reading a book about racism to our students. Her blonde hair blew all over her fair face as she described how shocked her kids were at the very idea of racial discrimination. “They truly don't see the difference between Black and White,” she told me, “and I'm proud of them for that.” I knew what she meant. But it is not that simple. Research shows children are aware of skin-color difference from six months of age and discriminate soon after (Katz, 2003). Do children talk about race? Not often. Lacking vocabulary for racial differences is not the same as being colorblind (Bonilla-Silva, 2006), which itself is not what it sounds like. Not talking about color or not “seeing” color ignores racial injustice, thereby letting it go on; it is not at all anti-racist.

A month earlier, I sat at a low, kidney-shaped table where Margo's kindergarten students learned to read. I was interviewing her as an introduction to my research project--helping teachers educate their students around race, ethnicity, and equity. Speaking about why she was

joining the project, she gestured with her light brown hands as she told me, “There were certain things that [were] happening outside of my room that I was like, ‘oh my gosh!’ I don’t even know what I would...what I would say if that happened in my room.” Margo continued, lowering her voice, “I think it was the librarian, [she] was reading a story and ... one of the little girls said, who’s Chinese [I think]? She was like, ‘Oh, my father does not like Black people, and neither do I.’ And it was the librarian ... she was like, ‘I was dumbstruck. I didn’t know what to say. I kind of just, I was not prepared for it.’ She’s like, ‘I kinda just...half the class wasn’t listening [and] we had to leave and it was time to clean up. So I kind of just said...I just kind of skipped over it.’” Margo continued, running through a list of responses the librarian could have made. Ultimately, Margo concluded, she didn’t know what she would have done, either.

Children live in a racist world, surrounded by implicitly or explicitly racist messages. How can we prepare them to cope? Teachers don’t know. Many of us don’t know how to approach racism, much less help children do so. In addition, many people, teachers included, believe these things about young children: They’re too young to understand discrimination. They don’t see skin color differences. Why ruin their innocence? I see it differently. I see even kindergarten students who have a righteous sense of fairness, who are determined to play with whoever they want, and who are eager to speak their minds, but daily experience a racist world they are not necessarily prepared to navigate. Teachers are in a position to help students resist racism. Sometime, they are forced to choose whether to help. I wanted to know how to help my students and to empower other teachers to do so also. So I began with this research into teachers and education around racism.

### **Problem of Practice**

I am a early childhood educator in a community I call Maintown, and I have taught two-to-six year olds for fifteen years. Maintown is a suburban community in the Northeastern United States within easy reach of major cities and wedged between affluent areas and more struggling neighborhoods. On a direct train line to a city with high-wage corporate employment, pockets of Maintown are bedroom community-like, higher income areas with a largely White population. The lower income areas are predominantly African American and Latinx. In between these areas, to the south of the train station, are middle-class neighborhoods where the population is economically, racially, and ethnically diverse. As a result of these demographics, economic and racial stratification exist side-by-side with a solidly diverse middle class. The population of the mid-sized school district is more diverse than most in the area. The district schools have students of many racial and ethnic groups, of varied socio-economic classes, and who speak several languages.

As the neighborhoods are somewhat diverse, yet somewhat segregated, so some elementary classrooms are diverse, some mostly White, and some mostly students of color. Several schools have had their catchment area lines redrawn (or re-zoned) to increase diversity. Some schools remain segregated. Common wisdom in town is that racial harmony exists in the elementary schools as children of various demographic groups play side by side, but that by the time students are fed into the two middle schools, and more dramatically the one high school, interactions between students are largely segregated. Recent incidents of racial division, as well as stereotyping and harassment of Black high-school students on social media, have necessitated interventions to address school cultures. Swastikas have been drawn in school bathrooms, Blackface and Whiteface videos have circulated, and worse. There is a clear need to promote



students' understanding of the effects of racist representations and ways of being and their critical thinking about the roots and impact of racism in their community.

However, the students can be seen as acting out what is considered by many as a discriminatory school system. Equity in the district is prevented not only by segregation in the elementary schools, but also by disparate treatment of students based on race in the more diverse, centralized middle schools and the high school. Specifically, lawsuits by parent groups have substantiated racial disparities in suspension rates as well as racial inequity in academic tracking in the upper grades. The myth of harmony in the elementary schools is belied by the facts of segregation: one elementary in a segregated neighborhood is under-resourced compared to the affluent, more White elementary schools. Incidents of insensitive curricular choices by elementary grade teachers have made the news. While the community touts its diversity and progressive politics, racial disparities and conflict in the schools have become a hot-button issue among parents and district administration. A district plan to restructure the schools to desegregate has met with a mixture of support and vocal opposition from the public. While structural changes are awaited, students sometimes struggle with interracial dynamics in their classrooms and hallways, and teachers undergo professional development for cultural competency and restorative justice approaches. All this may help, eventually.

For teachers wanting to support change now in these Maintown's schools and in the lives of students, training in and support using critical literacy could be key. Learning to think critical about race, ethnicity, and inequity may help students navigate the complex implicit messages of the school system and community of which they are a part. The self-proclaimed "stigma-free" town whose leaders take pride in progressive values is home to families who resist school desegregation. Older students see diversity in the hallways, self-segregation in the lunchroom,

advanced classes filled primarily with White students, and general education classes that consist mostly of student of color. Better positioning teachers to take on such an important and delicate task as fostering students' critical consciousness around race, ethnicity, and equity would benefit students in this complicated system. Students who can analyze their context and see inequitable systems may be less likely to internalize racism and racist perspectives. Critical literacy teaching can help students learn to critique their social worlds and form their own informed beliefs. Professional development in critical methods has potential to foster more equitable and empowering curricula and pedagogy.

### **What Is Critical Literacy?**

Paulo Freire (1970) wrote about literacy as liberation almost fifty years ago. Critical literacy (CL) has its roots in Freire's work. He viewed literacy not as a collection of skills for decoding print, but as a social action, a construction of knowledge of the world in a social context, and an opportunity to critically assess and make change to unjust power structures (Freire & Macedo, 1987). This suggests that the act of reading is liberation. Critical literacy is described as not one feature of classroom practice but rather as a way of being (Vasquez, 2017): As Vivian Vasquez writes, "There is no such thing as a critical literacy text. Rather there are texts through which we may be able to better create spaces for critical literacies" (p. 7). As such, teacher/researchers have engaged as CL tools books, advertising, newspaper accounts, water bottles, and more (Janks, 2014; O'Brien, 2001; Vasquez, 2004, 2010). From its theoretical roots to the present, CL is inherently about social justice and the "democratic potential of education" (Vasquez, 2017, p. 2). Students become empowered by comprehending the relationship between texts, authorial messages, societal power relations, and their social worlds.

CL with young children began in part with influential work by Barbara Comber (2001). In studies of CL with young children I examined, CL most often involved the teacher and/or students reading a book or cultural text and together discussing the voices of characters, the author(s)'s intended messages, and how the author was attempting to persuade students, as well as missing voices or perspectives, and connections to power relations (Beveridge & McLeod, 2009; Camangian, 2015; Chafel, Flint, Hammel & Pomeroy, 2007; Comber & Simpson, 2001; Fain, 2008; Gove & Still, 2014; Kim, 2015; Kuby, 2013; Leland, Harste, & Huber, 2005; Mankiw & Strasser, 2013; Peterson & Chamberlain, 2015; Saunders, 2012; Stribling, 2014; Yokota & Kolar, 2006). Some researchers incorporated extension activities related to the text and supporting students' emerging understandings (Beveridge & McLeod, 2009; Comber & Simpson, 2001; Kuby, 2013; Souto-Manning, 2015; Wolk & Labbo 2004). Teacher/researchers also followed students' discoveries of inequities in their context and support their efforts to act for social change and fairness (Kuby, 2013; Souto-Manning, 2015).

### **Why Early Childhood?**

Some will say young students aren't "ready" for such controversial topics. But children already notice and draw conclusions about race and power dynamics they encounter daily; according to research, children from age three on are forming racial constructs and stereotypes, and developing distinct attitudes around racial differences (Augoustinos & Rosenwarne, 2001; Katz, 2003; Liu & Blila, 1992; Patterson & Bigler, 2006). Research also demonstrates that students' in-school communication choices around their immigration status reflects knowledge and awareness of the significant and potentially threatening implications of sharing this information (Mangual Figueroa, 2017). Not only are children aware of racial differences and forming related attitudes, many children are aware of inequitable social situations they face.

Issues of race-based inequity—an everyday reality in so many Black and Brown students’ lives—seem like a glaring omission in the education of students, including young children.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Many authors have described the reproduction of racism and inequity in schools, from Pierre Bourdieu writing in 1970 and Jean Anyon in 1980 to Gloria Ladson-Billings in the 2006. Many have also described ways to attempt reform in schools and for the benefit of the wider society (Giroux, 1987; Ladson Billings, 1992, 2009; Banks, 1997; Duncan-Andrade, 2005; Pollock, 2008; Vasquez, 2010; Singleton, 2014; Camangian, 2015; Souto-Manning, 2015). The education debt (Ladson Billings, 2006) contributes to a profoundly unequal system and society in the United States. Active anti-racist reform of schools is necessary, at all levels from administration to classroom teachers, if students are to be given equal educational opportunities. The problem is, what can individual teachers do for their students in the interim, while pushing for reform to happen from above? As a teacher myself, I have long hoped for something that *I can do now*.

The idea of making educational spaces anti-racist spaces is not new. Gloria Ladson Billings (2009) wrote about effective teaching of African American students through culturally responsive pedagogy that helps give them an equal opportunity to succeed. Angela Valenzuela (2010) described a needed culture of caring that would support students of color thriving in school. Caring and culturally responsive teaching are crucial factors in building anti-racist cultures at school. I believe students of all races and ethnicities also need critical consciousness about race, ethnicity, and equity as part of their education. Skills of social critique benefit students by giving them the tools to recognize and resist bias and discrimination and damaging implicit messages about race, even in their own education.

In addition, there is evidence in research that students also experience greater success in core-subject skills like reading and math when they are taught with social justice pedagogy (Duncan-Andrade, 2005). In one three-year study of a teacher inquiry group for social justice teaching, Duncan-Andrade found that “the teachers with the highest student test scores in the group all subscribe to Paulo Freire’s idea that effective education for marginalized groups must employ a liberatory pedagogy—that is, one that aims to help students become critical change agents who feel capable of and responsible for addressing social injustices in their communities (Freire, 1970)” (p. 70). Not only is developing critical thinking and consciousness valuable for student social and identity formation, critical pedagogy supports learning academic subjects like literacy and math.

Focusing thematically on issues of racial equity, I framed this critical literacy professional development intervention employing concepts of culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP), drawing on the work of Ladson-Billings (1992, 2006, 2009). CRP connects teaching with students’ home and community cultures to best engage them in relatable, resonant learning. When selecting books, the participants and I attempted to reflect the races, ethnicities, and cultures they saw in their classrooms and community. In addition, we made an effort to incorporate stories that introduced communities and cultures that might have been new to some of their students, to broaden their perspectives beyond their personal experiences and neighborhoods. For this aspect of planning the intervention, I relied on Banks’ (1997) transformational approach to multicultural curricula, which displaces Eurocentrism to develop in students “cross-cultural competency”(p. 27). These two perspectives informed my perspective on the selection of texts, but also added to my conceptual framework around overall curricular goals.

## **Overview of the Study**

The following study explores how professional development (PD) supports teachers in implementing critical literacy read-alouds with kindergarten students around race, ethnicity, and equity. In the next chapter, I examine the research literature on PD for CL with young students, in particular looking at PD on race and ethnicity for White educators. Given that the majority of educators are White, 80 percent in 2015-16 (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics cited in Geiger, 2018), research with White educators in particular is relevant. Chapter three describes the design-based methodology of the study, including my positionality, the research design, instructional design of the PD, and the design of the CL intervention with students. In chapter four, I examine participants' goals for their participation, as stated in introductory interviews, and how they hoped to effect change for their students and, in some cases, for U.S. society. Pairing their ambitious goals with the steps they envisioned themselves taking to reach their goals, I found a disconnect that limited what individual participants could achieve through our intervention from the outset, barring changes to their willingness to engage in anti-racist teaching. In chapter five, I explore the push and pull within the PD group around finding the "right" way to teach young children about race, ethnicity, and inequity. I found that our discomfort around race talk amongst ourselves in the PD group also became a barrier to self-reflection and refinement of the curriculum, although students' insights demonstrated that we had some success in promoting critical thinking around race, ethnicity, and inequity among young children. Chapter six traces participants' arguments and many rationales against certain anti-racist teaching actions (rejecting certain books, concepts, and terms). By examining these eight rationales, I found that especially White participants' discomfort around race talk with students became a barrier to design and implementation of an anti-racist

curriculum. Implications of the study for researchers, professional developers, and (especially White) teachers are described in the conclusion.

In the present educational climate, implementing literacy as anything other than a skill can be a struggle. In 1987, Giroux wrote, “progressive educators must join with each other ... to fight for the importance and practice of critical literacy as a part of the indispensable process of self and social formation” (p. 27). This is still true today. Teachers who wish to implement critical literacy on racism face obstacles. Our country is deeply divided and tense around race issues, and in many spaces, especially schools, talk about race is taboo. As a teacher, it may be hard to know where to begin talking with kids about race, in addition to how to cope with emotional responses to the topic from children, parents, other teachers, and oneself. Training teachers to work together to implement critical literacy around race, ethnicity, and equity is one means to help children receive a more empowering education that offers them tools for navigating their complex racial contexts.

### **Research Questions**

The overarching question for this investigation were: How is teachers’ participation in the CL study group reflected in their classroom practice of CL using literature on race and racial inequity?

Sub-questions that will inform the research will be:

- How do teachers implement CL in the classroom while participating in the study group?
- What are teachers’ hopes and goals for participation in the study group?
- What are teachers’ understandings of racial inequality and their role as educators in relation to these issues, and how does this shift over time?

- From the perspective of participating teachers, what experiences within the study group do they feel support or hinder their use of critical literacy?
- How could the intervention be improved to benefit future teacher users?



## **Chapter 2**

### **Literature Review**

In the interest of becoming thoroughly familiar with existing literature on critical literacy (CL) in classrooms, especially early childhood classrooms, I searched major educational and academic libraries and databases, consulted knowledgeable professors, and reviewed reference lists for prominent names. Empirical studies on CL with young children existed, but were not extensive. Studies with young children talking about race and ethnicity were fewer. Nevertheless, this review of the literature relevant to my focus will examine three general categories of research on CL in classrooms, especially early childhood classrooms. First, I reflect on studies of the effectiveness of CL to influence children's beliefs. These researchers were interested in reforming young children's stereotyped attitudes. Second, I examine those studies on empowering students to think critically about texts, their lives, and society and in some cases to take transformative action. Here, teacher/researchers describe classroom CL practices with the goal of instilling critical thinking skills in their students and to empower students to pursue change. Third, I look at studies on preparing pre-service and in-service teachers to implement CL in their classrooms including challenges to implementing CL. Several key findings from this body of literature were helpful as I sought to design PD to develop teachers' CL practices. Lastly, I will consider literature on White teacher education around diversity and the challenges faced by developers and students. This is highly relevant, as three of the four teachers in this study were White, and my findings reflect on behaviors seemingly specific to them. In summation, I discuss the key findings of each group of studies and what remains absent from the literature.

### **Critical Literacy for Reducing Bias**

This first group of studies measure change in children's stereotyped beliefs pre- and post-intervention (Hawkins, 2007, 2014; Kim, 2015; Trepanier-Street & Romatowski, 1999). In these studies, teachers read picture books aloud to influence children's stereotyped beliefs about race and gender. In Kim's (2015) study, a teacher at a predominantly Korean American early-childhood school introduced multicultural texts with African American characters and diversity themes in an effort to reduce her students' biased racial attitudes. Over five months of CL read-alouds, the researcher found reduction of racialized and biased comments from target children, as documented in video recordings of classroom discussions and one-on-one interviews with students. Trepanier-Street & Romatowski (1999) conducted pre- and post-tests of a group of 74 pre-kindergarten to first-grade boys and girls around a critical literacy intervention teaching six gender-neutral books related to occupations. Children tested on a researcher-devised instrument more consistently responded that either gender could be a pilot, nurse, etc. post-intervention. Hawkins (2014) videotaped 36 readings of texts about ethnic and gender stereotypes to two groups of preschoolers over 11 weeks, using transcripts of their conversations to find that with a small number of exceptions the children who began the study stating exclusionary beliefs ("Those kids can't play together... 'cos you need a White friend," p. 730) ended the study with inclusionary beliefs ("It doesn't make any difference what colour [sic] your skin is; you can still play together," p. 731).

These studies suggest that it is possible to change young children's stereotyped or biased understandings using literature. The evidence presented through excerpts of children's talk is convincing. Challenging children's stereotypes is an important part of critical literacy work, and in a sense is "step one" in engaging students in societal critique. It is liberatory in the sense that children are themselves less limited and defined by their own internalized stereotypes, such as

what occupations they can aspire to and whom they can befriend. These studies add weight to the argument that CL can successfully influence children's thinking and constructs.

### **Critical Literacy for Critical Consciousness**

Case studies of educators practicing CL in their classrooms for the purpose of building students' critical consciousness dominate the research on CL (Camangian, 2015; Fain, 2008; Chafel, Flint, Hammel & Pomeroy, 2007; Lara & Leija, 2014; Leland, Harste & Huber, 2005; Peterson & Chamberlain, 2015; Saunders, 2012; Souto-Manning, 2009; Stribling, 2014; Wolk & Labbo, 2004). Critical consciousness, for my purposes, refers to students' awareness of social structures that oppress groups of people and their ability to think critically about such oppression in their own or others' lives. Samples in these case studies were generally one teacher and their class of roughly 10 to 20 students. CL was implemented in younger classrooms using picture book "read-alouds" followed by guided discussion with students (Hawkins, 2007, 2014; Kim, 2015; Mankiw & Strasser, 2013; Norris, Lucas & Prudhoe, 2012; Stribling, 2014; Trepanier-Street & Romatowski, 1999). In some cases, this was followed by activities such as writing, drawing, or presentations exploring children's thinking about the texts' themes. Themes included gender bias, civil rights, ethnic discrimination, racism, schooling inequity, linguistic marginalization, and poverty. In several articles, teachers were interviewed by the researchers. In others, teacher-researchers relied on their own in-depth observations of classroom practices gathered through the use of field notes and audio recordings. Teacher-researchers Wolk & Labbo (2004) employed critical literacy as a tool for creating democratic classrooms and for educating students about democratic citizenship. Camangian (2015) was concerned with giving students the cognitive toolkit to critique specific incidents of oppression they were experiencing personally.

These studies show crucial elements of the approach teachers use to teach texts in a critical manner. Key features of their approach included: creating a “safe” classroom atmosphere where students could voice their ideas freely (Kim, 2015); helping students to question the assumptions of the authorial voice (Meller & Hatch, 2008); and asking open-ended and thought-provoking guiding questions to encourage student discussion (Chafel, Flint, Hammel & Pomeroy, 2007; Leland et al., 1999; Meller & Hatch, 2008; Yokota & Kolar, 2006). Additional aspects of classroom approaches include carefully selecting texts (Enriquez, 2014; Kelley and Darragh, 2011; Leland et al., 1999), and in some cases supporting student actions toward concrete change (Souto-Manning, 2009). This body of literature more closely mirrored my own goals for implementing CL with Maintown students: fostering critical consciousness and empowerment.

### **Critical Literacy as Catalyst for Change**

At least one teacher-researcher engaged students in action for concrete change to a situation of racial inequity in their school (Souto-Manning, 2009); most I found did not. In an action research study of CL practices with her first grade class, Souto-Manning was responsive to students’ concerns about racial bias in gifted and talented pull-out classes in their school. In the course of the study, as the students read and discussed multicultural picture books about segregation, they resolved to take action upon the form of segregation they experienced at school. The gifted and talented programs lifted most of the White students out of the classroom for “advanced” instruction through inquiry methods. Students presented the principal with their concerns about curricular and pedagogical equity and asked that they all be taught through inquiry methods, together. Through significant lobbying by class parents, teachers, and administrators, the students were granted permission to be taught all together through the inquiry

methods. This is an example of liberatory teaching for social change as Freire might have envisioned. Souto-Manning's students critically assessed their own oppression, advocated for and achieved change. James Banks also referred to teaching for multicultural awareness as a catalyst for change, calling this a "social action approach" wherein "students make decisions on important social issues and take actions to help solve them" (1997, p. 26). While my study was limited to teaching for critical consciousness and did not encompass teaching for structural change in schools, I do consider building critical consciousness a valid change process in itself.

### **Professional Development and Critical Literacy**

I focused on eight studies that addressed educators' training and preparation to use CL, as well as their struggles with the process (Beveridge and McLeod, 2009; Chamberlain, 2015; Cho, 2015; Gove and Still, 2014; Herbeck et al., 2008; Meller and Hatch, 2008; Norris, Lucas and Prudhoe, 2012; Riley, 2015). Training for teachers found in this portion of the literature ranged from academic coursework to independent study groups. The first studies reviewed here break down CL into specific tasks, e.g. drafting questions. Meller and Hatch (2008) found that pre-service teachers benefitted from practice selecting texts, generating guiding questions, then role-playing their read-alouds and discussions. Each of these component parts will be explored in a subsection below. Studies later in the section emphasize the group process of supporting teachers through their varying experiences with implementation.

**Selecting texts.** An article by Leland et al. (1999) recommended selecting books that "invite specific conversations around specific topics [but also] function as a whole to create a curriculum which honors diversity and invites students to explore" (p. 72). One straightforward way to choose read-aloud books is by matching the themes or social issues raised therein to your target curriculum subjects. However, Kelley and Darragh (2011) as well as Enriquez (2014)

found that many texts oversimplify issues, stereotype characters, or omit crucial voices when dealing with social justice topics, in particular U.S. poverty. Critical analysis of the quality of the representation of characters and issues is important in designing a CL curriculum. Holistic and nuanced portraits humanize characters and allow students a more complete picture of issues. With any text, teachers must also consider the authors' control over which voices are heard and messages expressed, imparting an implicit perspective with inherent biases (Enriquez, 2014). Several studies described that teachers should consider authorial bias and whether they will teach "with or against" that bias. A curriculum including thought-provoking texts may be selected for their social-justice oriented content. The discourses used to engage in conversations about those books opens spaces for critical literacy.

**Guiding questions.** In many studies, designing guiding questions to facilitate student discussion was an important element of the PD intervention (Chafel, Flint, Hammel & Pomeroy, 2007; Comber & Simpson, 2001; Hatch, 2008; Janks, 2014; Leland et al., 1999; Meller & Hatch, 2008; O'Brien, 2001; Yokota & Kolar, 2006). Modeling for children a questioning stance toward literature, asking questions such as, "What do you think the author is saying?" or "Who isn't heard from in this story?" supports students' critical thinking about environmental messages (Comber & Simpson, 2001; Hatch, 2008). Hatch described a typology of critical questions, including questions such as, "what is missing from the narrative?" "which people don't you hear in the story and what might they say if you heard them?" and "who has the power in the story?" (p. 336). Teachers in PD developed open-ended questions, such as asking about the author's intended messages or about connections between the text and the children's experiences, to help their young students generate original critical thinking. Guiding questions, when well designed, ask students to consider textual themes for themselves and/or to make personal connections to

the text. They help expand students' experience of the literature beyond passive listening toward personally relevant analysis.

**Collaboration and peer discussion.** Three studies on CL PD specifically employed teacher collaboration and discussion, most closely mirroring the proposed research. These studies loosely draw on the literature of professional learning communities (PLCs) or communities of practice: small groups collaborate to address common goals of improving a particular element practice. Judith Warren Little, as quoted by Bruce Joyce (2004), described the process: "teachers engage in frequent, continuous, and increasingly concrete and precise talk about teaching practice" (p. 76). Teachers sharing and learning from one another's experiences with specific practices may potentially increase their own reserves of knowledge, insight, and ability. Richard DuFour (2004) writes, "the powerful collaboration that characterizes professional learning communities is a systematic process in which teachers work together to analyze and improve their classroom practice" (p. 9). A model similar to a PLC was used in a small group of studies that emphasized peer exchange and collaboration.

In the first of three studies, Gove and Still (2014) conducted two and a half years of monthly meetings with two to three facilitators, teaching about CL itself, exploring the purposes of CL as opposed to direct instruction, modeling lessons, drafting open-ended discussion questions, and throughout encouraging discussion and/or writing responses among eight to ten teachers in grades one to three (p. 258). Using a "teach-reflect-teach" format, participants taught CL lessons in their own classrooms followed by examination their CL teaching, continually seeking improvement. The authors found that a small group collaborating over an extended period did support individual teachers to implement CL read-alouds, as well as to develop classroom cultures that valued student critical thinking and voice. Beveridge and McLeod (2009)

used a similar “reflective cycle” to direct collaborative planning, implementation, and reflection on read-alouds using authentic-voice literature on Aboriginal Australian cultures and historical violations of their rights. In the study, the authors described their PD model as a spiral leading from planning to “act and observe” to reflection, then planning the next action (p. 188). The authors found that the continuous self-reflection and peer feedback helped refine the effectiveness of CL teaching and the implementation skills of the teachers.

Riley (2015) provided her “study group” with opportunities for self-reflection and peer support. Riley brought together five teachers around implementing CL practices in their classrooms. The group spent the first nine bi-weekly meetings of their year-long study discussing the texts they had selected. In this time, they also “gained a sense of common areas of inquiry (e.g., teacher identity, relationships, White privilege, language, and power) and built a sense of trust” (Riley, 2015, p. 419). The researcher concluded that this trust and support between study group members is of benefit to teachers not only in exchanging knowledge, but also in overcoming challenges to implementing CL. Riley’s study group format suited my objectives of using research as a tool to problem-solve through direct implementation of an intervention. Following this approach, students received the benefit of CL while teachers and I simultaneously learned about its implementation.

Although a side product of their main findings, Meller and Hatch (2008) noted that their students’ discussion among themselves around the social justice issues embedded within the texts provided each with “broader insights” (p. 339). This aspect of the study suggested that teachers develop their own consciousness of equity issues from conversing together and sharing their perspectives. While this peer-to-peer consciousness-raising is not explored by the authors, it may be the case that this deepened consciousness supports their ability to communicate these



issues to students. Meller and Hatch's observation about peer-to-peer conversation about issues also came into play in my research: how teachers' talk with one another supported refining their practice, expanded their awareness of the justice and equity issues they were teaching about, or how the opposite may actually have occurred instead.

### **Teachers' challenges to implementing CL**

Five studies I looked at examined teachers' perceptions of the benefits and challenges of CL teaching. While teachers generally felt CL was beneficial for students, several factors external to the classroom were obstacles. Peterson and Chamberlain (2015) make note of the difficulties of test-driven school climate, writing that teachers "reported some tensions that arose between the use of critical read-alouds and the need to get his students to pass the standardized test mandated by the state" (p. 244). Some teachers reported that they did not have time for both types of instruction; others believed that the type of thinking students engage in for different tasks conflict and inhibit each other. One teacher stated, "the new approach [students] took toward critical text analysis actually made teaching to the test more difficult" (p. 244). As a solution, students who were believed to parse exam questions too critically were subsequently taught to take the perspective of the test authors and answer what they thought had been intended.

Norris, Lucas and Prudhoe (2012) found different concerns when they conducted a survey of 27 pre-service teaching students engaged in a class on diversity in early childhood education. The authors reported that personal discomfort with complex topics and potential conflict with parents around the introduction of controversial issues inhibited the teachers. Cho (2015), in a study that collected discussion posts of two classes of pre-service and in-service teacher education students, found three major themes around teacher hesitance to engage in CL:

test-driven school climate, resistance from parents, and their own lack of understanding of CL. Herbeck et al. (2008) surveyed 39 middle school teachers in one district and in 15 responses found that a wide range of social justice issues were addressed in classrooms, but with little consistency—only discussing racial prejudice for Martin Luther King, Jr. Day, for example. Teachers who did not address such topics more thoroughly often cited lack of time in the school day or absence of curricular mandate. Members of Riley's (2015) study group encountered resistance to their critical methods of teaching from school administration, including receiving poor evaluations and accusations of "lack of rigor." The trust and commonality of purpose created within Riley's study group became a central feature of coping with these challenges: group members served as emotional support and encouragement to persist in teaching critically and with a social justice orientation. The study found that emotional support enabled perseverance in CL practice. Perseverance and mutual consciousness-raising were two of my goals for the teachers in the proposed Maintown study, along with refinement of CL practices. As such, based on the findings of the reviewed literature, I felt that the most appropriate format for this study was the collaborative, reflective-cycle study group.

### **White Teachers and PD Around Race and Ethnicity**

When developing and facilitating PD around race, ethnicity, and equity with White teachers, it is important to consider participants' own relationship with these topics from their White perspective. White racial identity development theorizes a progression of statuses White individuals pass through as they grow toward a healthy anti-racist White identity (Helms, 1995). According to theorists such as Janet Helms, White people do not operate from firmly within one status, but can be in transition between two statuses or embody elements of multiple statuses. A summary of this development process is explained here, along with a analysis of where my

participants fall in this progression, followed by a synthesis of literature on PD for building teachers' critical consciousness around race and thereby shaping their pedagogy. I also addressed how the literature applies to this current study.

**White racial identity development.** Helms wrote in 1995 that White racial identity develops through six statuses. "The first, 'Contact Status,' is best described as obliviousness," (Lawrence & Tatum, 1998, p. 53) , and is characterized by seeing White as the norm yet believing themselves to be prejudice-free or "colorblind." Some White people in this status also believe racism to be equivalent to individual bias and discrimination, not structural in nature. They have no awareness of White privilege yet. This initial status is followed by "Disintegration" in which their awareness is challenged by new information, resulting in guilt, anger, or sadness and potentially denial. "Reintegration" occurs when the feelings of disintegration evolve into fear, anger, resentment, and a "blaming the victim" mentality. "Pseudo-independence" comes when White people begin to accept the existence of racism and White privilege and begin taking some responsibility. In this status, White people may actively develop cross-racial relationships and examine Whiteness. During "Immersion/Emersion," White individuals actively seek out information about Whiteness, challenge their identity assumptions, and seek White allies with whom to challenge racism. Finally, "Autonomy" is reached, when a positive and anti-racist White racial identity is formed and self-examination and anti-racist action are undertaken. Studies have shown that White racial identity undergoes development through these statuses when individuals engage in multicultural education course as pre-service or in-service teachers (Lawrence & Tatum, 1998, 2004).

Reflecting on my data, I attempted to place White participants in this study within Helms' statuses in an attempt to better understand their stance and development through our

work together. Each White participant demonstrated elements of different statuses, but generally seem to share the characteristics of pseudo-independence. White participants not only expressed progressive views acknowledging the existence of inequity and racism, but also took some action on their opposition to a racist society by joining the intervention and attempting to cultivate anti-bias in their students. However, as will be shown, when I asked them to take some more definitive actions in their anti-racist teaching, such as using the term “racist” with students, their desire to enact change became circumscribed by avoidance of discomfort. As Lawrence and Tatum (2004) wrote on page 364,

When White persons can, more often than not, acknowledge that institutional racism exists and are able to abandon some of their stereotypes and past beliefs about the racial order, they are capable of moving toward a non-racist identity. This dominant “pseudo-independent” thinking, however, tends to result in an intellectual commitment to ending racism rather than an active one.

As will be discussed in findings chapters, there was a limit to what White participants were willing to enact in the name of the anti-racist teaching they intellectually committed to. Desire for social change through education, as stated in participants’ introductory interviews, was loosely coupled with action for change, as is typical for this status.

One critique of White identity development theories lies in its model of progression through various stages toward a final, ideal end point. Audrey Thompson (2003) writes that stage theories assume an ideal that is a projection of how the theorist sees themselves. The White theorist who assumes they know what ideal anti-racism looks like is not just making a big assumption and idealizing their knowledge, they are also missing that like racism, anti-racism is dynamic and shifts and appears in different forms in different periods of history. How will they know what

anti-racism will mean and look like in a decade or two? Thompson argues that theorists who posit an ideal end point of White anti-racist identity development “assume that we *know* what it means to be an anti-racist white person” (p. 20). While knowledge of what this means may be especially difficult for a White theorist, Thompson includes theorists of color who use these stages in their research and work. Instead, she describes the process of becoming anti-racist as a “journey” without a clear endpoint: “What will come to count as anti-racist will change as we take on new lived possibilities.” From this perspective, responsiveness and humility become central elements of a dynamic anti-racist way of being.

**Multicultural PD with White educators.** Studies of the experience of White educators in multicultural and anti-racist PD addressed a pervasive and complicated reality of schooling in the United States: while the larger portion of students in public education are students of color, a large majority of the teachers are White: In 2015-16, 80 percent of the teaching force of K-12 schools was White and 51 percent of students were nonWhite (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics cited in Geiger, 2018). Educating White teachers or pre-service teachers about their work with diverse students is crucial and yet faces obstacles.

Bree Picower (2009) explores the emotional, ideological, and performative “tools of Whiteness” that she maintains White teachers employed to not only resist change to their understandings of race, but also to actively protect ideology of White supremacy. Through writing samples from and interviews with eight White pre-service teachers who had been enrolled in a multicultural education course, Picower identified powerful ideologies in participants’ statements that served as techniques for rejecting learning around White privilege and supremacy, both historical and contemporary. For example, one “tool” was summed up by the statement, “it’s personal not political.” This view of racism as individual bias and

discrimination and not a system of oppression negates the power of racist structures in our society by choosing to see only individual “bad actors.” This and other tools were ways of thinking about racism that help White individuals maintain their White supremacy that was threatened by the course content. Each tool was not specific to that individual teacher, but was also commonly used by some White people in general. The process of White participants’ rationalization that I observed in this study warrants some comparison to Picower’s tools of Whiteness. In Picower’s study, the “tools” were employed by White individuals to protect their ideology of dominance. My participants’ rationales were employed to justify their avoidance of acting upon their anti-racist ideals.

Other researchers have documented obstacles in the form of White participants’ resistance as well as utilizing self-reflection as a pedagogical method to overcome this. In the context of preparing White teachers to use culturally responsive teaching (CRT), Gay and Kirkland (2003) used techniques including having students draft personal position statements and role play multiple perspectives. Gay and Kirkland also modeled critical self-reflection and supported critical exchange with other students. The researchers described their students’ resistance strategies as including “silence, diversion, guilt, and benevolent liberalism” (p. 181). Education student comments that accomplish resistance, summarized by the authors, included, “‘it’s more about economic status,’” “‘Isn’t that stereotyping?’” and “‘If I teach them according to their cultural styles, won’t the White kids be discriminated against?’” Comments like these undermine the significance of racial inequity and provide an “out” from teaching more responsively.

Researchers also have examined how White teachers develop and change through their experiences of multicultural or anti-racist PD both in terms of their racial constructs and their

classroom actions. In their 1998 article, Lawrence and Tatum describe their research with White education students in their multicultural and anti-racist courses. The researchers collected interviews and student writing samples looking for change over time in racial identity development along Helms' continuum of statuses, as well as to see how teachers implemented change in their classrooms. The PD itself was designed to overcome some of the obstacles described by Picower, self-reflection being a key element. In one notable activity, education students were asked, at the beginning of the course, to record interviews with themselves from a set of questions about their experiences, attitudes, and images around people of color. Later, near the conclusion of the course, they were asked to listen back to their interviews and analyze in writing their own past perspectives in light of what they had learned since. This allowed them to confront themselves as race-privileged and "capable of racist thoughts and behaviors" (p. 52). More self-reflection was part of the coursework in forms of weekly written papers and small-group discussion. As part of the courses, students were also asked to develop anti-racism "action plans," which reflects an important aspect of Helms' "autonomy" status. This kind of structured self-reflection both mirrored and facilitated growth in the students' racial identity development, leading to their experiencing a desire to take responsibility for personally resisting racism in their practice and lives.

In a related article, Christine Sleeter (1996) addressed helping White preservice teachers reconsider race in her courses. Rather than teaching them that they are wrong in their constructs, she set out to help them examine and reconstruct their existing knowledge and beliefs about race and social stratification as one part of multiple accurate perspectives. As she wrote, "While it is difficult for many people to accept that there are multiple perspectives and multiple experiences, it is even more difficult for an individual to accept that he or she is completely wrong" (pp. 47-

48), thus she tried to add to students' existing racial constructs information about how discrimination and racism work, rather than "correct" their racist thinking. Her curriculum included readings, simulations, and independent student investigations of racism in students' personal context. While Sleeter does acknowledge that some of her students still expressed anger and defensiveness, she described her method as effective. Sleeter's approach shows that self-reflection can take different forms and use different methods than simply a journal and group discussion.

Reflecting on the emphasis placed upon White racial identity development in a good portion of the literature about PD with White educators, I return to Thompson's (2003) point about progressive stages moving toward one anti-racist ideal. The participants in my study volunteered to take on anti-racist teaching, yet even they were not at Helms' autonomy stage. In the literature generally, as reviewed above, few White pre-service or in-service teachers—even those hoping to work with diverse populations—seem to have been there. While Thompson's criticism about the ultimate stage in identity development is valuable, how often will the autonomy stage be reached and then become limiting in its definition of that ideal identity? Sadly, not that often. To Thompson's point that White theorists are idealizing their anti-racist credentials, so to speak, I see this as a problem with the progressive White participants in this study, as well as in my own overconfident approach to our curricular decisions. Each of us viewed ourselves as on the righteous side of the racism line, yet in action we were far from perfectly anti-racist.

Despite reviewing the literature on preparing White teachers for diverse student groups, literature which is thorough in suggesting pedagogical strategies for shaping pre-service and in-service teachers' ideas about and dispositions toward teaching diverse groups of students, I



nevertheless find that these studies leave out a crucial aspect of the endeavor. Writing in 2001, Sleeter reviewed teacher preparation and finds that few studies “follow graduates into the classroom” (p. 102) to find out what training make teachers effective in teaching their students. The ultimate measure of a program should be the impact on the student, and in reviewing the literature today, I find there is still little evidence of what teacher education programs do best by children.

**The study and White participants.** In general, the literature on White educators and multicultural PD reviewed here points to obstacles of resistance and methods to work through it. This relates to my study in two ways: the literature helps me frame and comprehend the avoidance I encountered, and it illustrates techniques I might have used to circumvent that resistance through more development of critical consciousness around race. In this study’s PD sequence, I emphasized “learning through doing,” meaning that I expected critical self-reflection to come easily because we were teaching social critique of racism to students. When I encountered White participants’ resistance, I was not aware of these tools at my disposal to work through it. My design should have incorporated more of the pedagogy found in this literature.

## **Conclusion**

The reviewed literature pointed to the effectiveness of CL for empowering students’ critical thinking and shed light on the methods to do so through direct teaching or PD for educators. Key features of CL for student empowerment emerged, such as facilitating open student discussion, listening to student ideas, selecting texts for themes and/or authorial voice, and asking thought-provoking, open-ended questions. Regarding PD for use of CL, the literature review presented evidence that peer-to-peer teacher discussion, progressing through a reflective cycle of continual improvement, as well as mutual emotional support of teachers when

encountering challenges, each benefit teachers in the work of implementing CL. However, when considering CL on race, ethnicity, and equity, it is important to consider the perspective of the teacher doing the implementation. Therefore, I also considered literature on multicultural and anti-racist PD, especially for White teachers, who were three-fourths of my participants. This review demonstrated several findings that are important for my study. Most importantly, while I chose an effective pedagogical approach to anti-racist teaching--critical literacy--I could have expected to encounter White resistance and been prepared for it. This literature provided a rich framework for the research and findings that follow.

## **Chapter Three**

### **Methodology**

With the problem and my purpose in mind, and with relevant literature considered, I needed an effective method to pursue getting topics around race, ethnicity, and equity into discussion in kindergarten classrooms while learning about beneficial methods for doing so. I designed the following qualitative research and professional development (PD) intervention using Design Based Research (DBR). The intervention was a professional learning community (PLC) with a mission of using a critical literacy (CL) approach and practices to raise students' awareness about topics of race, ethnicity, and equity, to empower them to identify and resist racism and ethnic discrimination, and to inspire interracial and interethnic solidarity. Before describing the research methods used, I will position myself in relation to my study and the themes examined therein. In the following three sections of this chapter, the research model and PD model will be described, as well as the critical literacy approach used in the classroom. I will describe the challenges I experienced recruiting my participants, as well as my data collection and analysis processes, and the validity and limitations of the study. These methods, reviewed here in detail, proved a useful model for both research and practical application.

### **Positionality**

Multiple and intersecting aspects of my identity informed my perspective on this study and my decisions and actions throughout. Sensoy and DiAngelo (2017) describe positionality in this way: "Positionality asserts that knowledge is dependent upon a complex web of cultural values, beliefs, experiences, and social positions" (p. 29). Thus, what I believed I knew going into this study as well as what I have learned from the work is seen through a lens of my own that is socially constructed by my group memberships and position in society and is unique to my

life experiences. The authors continue, “The ability to situate oneself as knower in relationship to that which is known is widely acknowledged as fundamental to understanding the political, social, and historical dimensions of knowledge.” By situating myself transparently, my prejudices and blind spots may become more visible to the reader. I will therefore acknowledge and state upfront my positionality in relation to the study, being aware that this is an essential aspect of decisions I made about how I present the information that I do.

I am a White, cisgender woman from an upper-middle class family background, an early childhood educator, and a self-avowed liberal-leaning “do-gooder.” At the time of writing, I have taught for over a dozen years, most of them in kindergarten. Most of my students have been White and middle or upper class, though I have also taught many children of color as well as children from a wide range of socio-economic statuses. Through my various teaching experiences, I have been a witness of extremes of social inequity and the interconnectedness of race and class. This informs my desire to use my work and education to bring about change in these circumstances.

DiAngelo’s (2016) *What It Means to Be White? Developing White Racial Literacy* informed me that a clear comprehension of my own (White, privileged) role in the perpetuation of racial inequity must be a prerequisite for facilitating others’ exploration of the workings of inequity in society and, more specifically, education. Much as McIntosh (1988, 1989) expressed in her writing on White privilege, I grew up unconscious of many of my advantages because I had no need to be aware of the dominant social position I enjoyed. Taught to believe in our society as a meritocracy, I safely believed I deserved my achievements, and remained ignorant of the disadvantages of not being White. As I learned about inequity, still I did not need to acknowledge my place in these imbalances, as I was raised to believe that racism was due to

racist individual bad actors. As McIntosh writes, “In my class and place, I did not see myself as a racist because I was taught to recognize racism only in individual acts of meanness by members of my group, never in invisible systems conferring unsought racial dominance on my group from birth” (1989, p. 35) This rings true for me as well. I enjoyed the luxury of being able to believe myself to be anti-racist while benefiting from generations of White supremacy. This ancestral advantage helped me to become highly educated, in fact, a doctoral student. My current position as a White researcher looking at teaching about racial and ethnic inequity is that of privilege: I choose to examine my and others’ ideas and behaviors in an effort to increase equity; I could study something else and be unaffected. By doing so, I am also seeking to parlay White privilege into additional advantage by increasing my prospects for post-graduate employment. These many positions all provide grains of salt with which to take this body of work.

My awareness of and reflection on my own positionality also informs my research. Throughout the study, I acted and made choices that may reflect my positionality as well as that were influenced by my self-reflection. In particular, being White may have contributed to my responses to other White participants’ discomfort, and later, as I examined the data I collected, I strove to take this into account in my analysis. Being a White woman, I could make an argument that I have an insightful perspective on the ways White teachers may or may not struggle with their role and choices when teaching and learning about race and ethnicity. I can compare my personal experiences with theirs’ when, for example, they cope with their own discomfort and boundaries around such teaching. The overlap in my perspective and positionality with that of my White participants can potentially help me more deeply analyze and understand the issues at play in our work. By comparing myself with the White participants in this study, my close inspection may lead to insight as well as strong critique, given that I critique my own discomfort

and limitations strongly. My lens of a White middle-class woman, an activist teacher, and also of a self-conscious researcher, all inform the following work.

In addition to my demographic positionality, I can be identified as a teacher and parent. My concern about social equity is channeled through these two identities and reflected in two beliefs: one, that my child and my students should be able to live in a more equitable world, and two, that their education should be the cradle of equitable experience that supports their belief of their own worthiness and ability to change the world. Seen through the lense of these beliefs, these three items about children from McIntosh's list of unearned advantages of Whiteness struck me with particular impact:

14. I can arrange to protect my children most of the time from people who might not like them.

15. I do not have to educate my children to be aware of systemic racism for their own daily physical protection.

16. I can be pretty sure that my children's teachers and employers will tolerate them if they fit school and workplace norms; my chief worries about them do not concern others' attitudes toward their race. (1988, p. 379)

The disparities in the experience of children illustrated by this list is poignant. My belief in the power of education to transform is called into question by number 16, which indicates the power of teachers' attitudes to discourage students that don't "fit in" based on race and/or ethnicity. In my position as a teacher looking at the work of other teachers in my study, I experienced some urgency to help participants do more than merely tolerate their students of color, and to model for White students more than tolerance. As I designed my study, I hoped my participants would actually empower their students to insist on an equitably rich learning experience as they head

into the educational system. My feeling of urgency, which stems from my personal ties to children, likely lends some pointedness to my analysis of teachers in the following pages.

My position relative to other educators and to philosophies of education is also necessary to establish here. My training was steeped in the progressive education philosophy. As such, I do not believe in education as Freire's (1970) "banking model" wherein students are empty vessels to be filled with a teacher's knowledge. I believe that learning comes through children's self-motivated interaction between their experience and input from their social world. Even while teaching young children with child-centered, emergent, and play-based curricula, I have been a skeptic. I perceived a lack of concern with equity and social justice in the pedagogy and curriculum. Freire wrote about education as liberation, problem solving, and engagement with the society. I operate from this framework of what teaching should be. As such, a privileged, middle-class, White woman educator with liberal values and activist tendencies, as well as a highly-educated student and a researcher, I designed and implemented the following study.

As a White teacher perceiving an urgency around creating empowering learning experiences around racial and ethnic inequity, I deliberately chose to work directly with teachers who daily shape students' education hoping to contribute to more children's learning beyond the walls of my own classroom. Knowing most teachers are White like I am, I believed self-reflection around these topics would be essential. Self-reflection is crucial to developing strong White racial identities around one's own activism, in this case, classroom activism. However, I also believed that self-reflection would be limited in a homogenous group. As Alice McIntyre (2008) wrote, "Homogeneity within the teaching profession can too easily mute self-evaluation and collective critique....White people are often unable to notice, name, and challenge our racist assumptions and beliefs when we talk only to one another" (p. 280). Collaboration among a

diverse group sharing perspectives might be helpful to expand self-reflection. I planned for a reflective and collaborative format for our work in attempts to facilitate participants' self-reflection as well as their feedback for one another around potentially emotional subjects of race, ethnicity, and inequity.

Once participants had volunteered for the research and intervention, I was happy to find some diversity in my participant group in one teacher of color, Margo. I hoped that diverse perspectives would challenge some assumptions and avoidant tendencies that might come up. My desire to include viewpoints of participants of color reflects my awareness that White voices often dominate discourse and group work. I desired rich debate on such complex issues. I was also aware that as the single person of color, Margo might have come to feel isolated or unfairly treated as a "representative" or people of color, so I avoided "spotlighting" her by asking her to weigh in *as a person of color* as opposed to simply as herself. Instead, I structured sharing reflections sequentially, taking turns to speak. I employed a facilitation approach--adapted from Serial Testimony--that democratically allotted airtime to each speaker sequentially around the table. I also modeled holding questions or comments until all participants had spoken. This was my attempt at giving equal voice to all the participants and resist domination of dialog by White participants. Through this process, I came to also see the value of hearing from the White participants, equitably, in order to better understand their particular experiences.

### **Research Design**

This qualitative, design-based research (DBR) brought together a study group of self-selected kindergarten teachers from four (of the five) elementary schools in one district. Serving as facilitator, I supported their collaborative work to develop a curriculum that taught students



key themes and topics through read-alouds and guided discussions. Pursuing my research goals followed alongside the intervention development as I collected multiple forms of relevant data.

Qualitative methods suited these research goals because I hoped to understand *in depth and detail* teachers' specific experience of developing a critical literacy intervention through the study group (Creswell, 2014; Merriam, 2009, chapter 9). In qualitative research, the researcher is the "key instrument" for collecting data in a natural setting and from multiple data sources (Creswell, 2014, p. 185). As facilitator for the study group, I was well placed to operate as the data collection instrument. By using DBR as my research paradigm, I was able to match my academic and educational goals with a specific method. The Design-Based Research Collective (2003) defines DBR as, "the study of learning in context through the systematic design and study of instructional strategies and tools" ( p. 5). One strength of DBR is the pairing of theory and practice. According to the authors, DBR encompasses five characteristics: it entails twin goals of designing learning environments or programs while also developing "prototheories;" it has a cyclical, iterative design; it leads to shareable theories for practitioners; it takes place in authentic settings; and it connects processes to outcomes (p. 5). This study sought to develop a practical program for local teachers to implement in the authentic setting of their classrooms. Simultaneously, the study sought to establish general principles of effective processes that would contribute to an improved model for dissemination to a wider audience of teachers. The structure of the PD followed a reflective cycle so that by reviewing each teaching session before planning the next, improvement could be continuous. The intervention as a whole could also be iterative, potentially: this dissertation covers only the first year of its potential life, since a guide for future use will be produced and shared and ideally refined by future users. Thus, DBR turned out to be the method that encompassed the multiple foci of the work I wished to engage in.

The personal investment of teachers in the intervention was crucial to its success. Engaging teachers in the process of program development, not simply in the implementation, helped ensure the intervention's real-world useability as well as participants' "buy-in." DBR was helpful in achieving this outcome, as it helps "researchers and designers understand the real-world demands placed on designs and adopters of designs. In addition, pursuing development and enactment through close collaboration with teachers places them in direct ownership of designs" (p. 8). Despite being a teacher myself, it would have been difficult for me to anticipate the implementation challenges specific to the context without the collaboration and "ownership" of the teachers involved. Collaboration was crucial to achieving an outcome of practicality in application. Thus, the research into the study group was designed for practical as well as theoretical outcomes.

### **Intervention Design**

I chose to implement a curriculum designed from a critical literacy perspective. Critical literacy (CL) is described in the literature as a critical, equity-minded way of thinking and being in the classroom deriving from and adjustable to the local social context of children. CL takes a critical perspective on knowledge and addresses social inequity and injustice. Coming from a whole language background Vasquez (2001) stated,

A critical perspective suggests that deliberate attempts to expose inequity in the classroom and society need to become part of the discourse of whole language (Edelsky, 1994). I see a need, therefore, for teachers committed to a whole language perspective to construct a critical curriculum that is socially just and equitable, where issues including race, class, gender, and fairness are constantly on the agenda. (p. 56)

She continues by describing what CL might look like in practice, not as discrete lessons but as organically grown curriculum using the inquiry questions of children: “It arises as teachers and students tune in to issues of social justice and equity unfolding through classroom conversation and begin to pose critical questions.” I believe that using children’s literature to jumpstart these conversations and questions can create spaces for conversations about fairness and justice that are already part of young students’ thinking about their social worlds. This is the approach I took in designing the classroom intervention: using picture books and discussion questions as catalysts for student conversation about social justice topics.

When participants and I collaboratively planned the read-alouds, text-based discussion questions, and extension activities, we were guided by Vasquez’s (2010) *Getting Beyond “I like the Book”*: *Creating Space for Critical Literacy in K-6 Classrooms*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. This text provided helpful criteria for selecting children’s literature for use as critical texts, as well as guidance in forming questions and classroom activities to draw out student responses. When planning extension activities, I also found useful several critical-thinking experiences adapted from *Critical Literacy in the Early Childhood Classroom: Unpacking Histories, Unlearning Privilege* by Candace Kuby (2013). In particular, I used perspective-taking activities as well as those cultivating student reflection on themes across books. Making a “learning wall” was one activity I adapted from suggestions in Vasquez and Kuby to be a culminating synthesis activity. These sources informed the intervention as implemented in the classroom.

In regard to texts read to students, we engaged in a forward-moving thematic trajectory, building content from one text upon another to guide students’ understandings. For example, we began with books about the science of skin color and the diversity of appearances before moving on to books about appreciating diversity, then on to bias and/or discrimination. Specific topics

that were explored in the children's books included skin color diversity and science, appreciation of racial and ethnic diversity, inclusion, segregation and the Civil Rights Movement, and economic inequity in communities of color. In the beginning, I recommended books for inclusion, but later on participants also suggested and selected titles with some input from me. Two books I suggested were rejected for reasons explored in the findings chapters. A list of children's books taught (and rejected) can be found in the appendix.

### **Instructional Design**

I chose as my PD model a PLC with adaptations for my particular mission, local context, and research needs. Dufour & Eaker (2009) described the characteristics of a PLC this way:

1. Shared mission, vision, and values
2. Collective inquiry
3. Collaborative teams
4. Action oriented and experimentation
5. Continuous improvement
6. Results orientation

Because participants self-selected into the study group's stated purposes, they presumably shared a common mission, vision, and values united by curiosity about our topics and willingness to act and experiment on a common problem. Collective inquiry, according to the authors, includes a process of public reflection within the team, shared meanings, joint planning, and coordinated action. We reflected and collaborated as a team and implemented the read-aloud intervention in a coordinated way in order to observe common themes in the results among students. Our results orientation manifested in observing students' verbal and nonverbal responses. We did not formally assess students' attitudes or awareness in any way, as this would be difficult and highly

contingent on verbal ability. Also, supporting student's empowerment to work for social change would take a lifetime to measure. Despite this adaptation, the PLC model was effective for our goals and productive for our work because it utilized a democratic system to access and employ participants' expertise in their field and with their students in pursuit of our mission. This small PLC, independent of the structure of one school or one school system but instead led by individual practitioners across schools, was dubbed a "critical literacy study group," or simply study group, for utilitarian purposes.

At each bi-weekly study group meeting, three steps were enacted. First, participants reflected on the previous read-aloud and guided discussion held in their classrooms between meetings. Together, we noted question types and/or pedagogical strategies that were most effective for eliciting conversations about the texts and stimulating deep, critical thinking among students. Second, we selected and read the next texts to be taught. Third, we developed discussion questions for those texts. The same steps were repeated at each of six meetings; the first and last meetings necessarily included introductory and summative activities. (Sample agendas can be found in the appendix.) The cyclical nature of our process helped refine our practice.

The organization of the study group meetings described above is a final, more effective structure that was an outcome of a less optimal previous structure. At first, our discussions of books previously read was followed the order of the discussion questions, with each participant chiming in on each question at will. I noticed that all participants were granted or utilized equal air time in our discussions, meaning some perspectives were becoming underrepresented. Specifically, I heard less from Margo, the one woman of color in the group. To remedy this disparity, I read about *serial testimony*, developed by Peggy McIntosh, and tried to conceive of

our dialogues as opportunities for self-expression and mutual listening. “In Serial Testimony, participants, whether they are adults or schoolchildren, speak in turn around a circle or around a classroom for a limited time without referring to what others have said,” van der Valk (2014) wrote about McIntosh’s concept, “They speak from experience—not from opinion—and hearing each other, they also learn more about themselves.” Without actually using a somewhat intimidating timer, I adjusted our sharing-out practice. I asked for the change at a meeting, describing the process and purpose of the approach, and participants eagerly agreed. Subsequently, each participant took a turn to share all their reflections at once without interruption or reference to others’ comments. This second iteration of our discussion structure proved more equitable and self-reflective.

The norms for the study group meetings drew on structures and protocols described in Singleton’s (2014) *Courageous Conversations about Race: A Field Guide for Achieving Equity in Schools, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.* and the corresponding *Facilitator’s Guide*. In particular, Singleton used “four agreements” as a basis for conversations on race (p. 27). In his work, these operated in a manner similar to developing norms for group dialog, but also as mindsets for deepening conversation. The agreements were: Stay engaged, experience discomfort, speak your truth, and expect and accept non-closure. By studying the ways discussants of different racial or ethnic groups navigate interracial discussion around race, Singleton came to see common “outs” that enabled people mentally exit or verbally short-circuit the conversation. Instead, he designed these principles for sustaining engagement. The four agreements were new to the participants. As I described the meanings and usefulness of each agreement, participants voiced that they could agree to and uphold the principles behind them. We reviewed the agreements as a refresher in subsequent meetings.

When planning the participant education portion of the PD, I had three topics that I wished to engage with: critical literacy practices; understandings of race, ethnicity, and equity; and child development in regard to racial and ethnic bias and discrimination. I intended to provide readings, videos, and potentially even guest speakers to offer perspective and background, in addition to our own ideally frank discussions around issues raised by the books and implementation. However, for a variety of reasons, much of this PD work did not take place. Certain efforts were well-received by participants. For example, at our first meeting we each brought in or described an “artifact,” an object or episode that shed light on our personal experience and thoughts around race, ethnicity, and equity. Participants shared a variety of stories that provided background and context for their perspective on our intended work.

Other efforts at building awareness and mutual understanding around our topics were flatly rejected, leading to my setting aside plans to work on consciousness raising. For example, in our second meeting I asked participants to engage in developing joint understandings around the terms “race,” “ethnicity,” and “equity.” Some confusion was expressed about the whether “race” referred strictly to skin color or included religion, culture, and history of oppression, etc. Before we settled on a way to look at the key terms, two participants expressed that they felt clear understanding was unnecessary for our work with young children. Dismissing consideration of meanings of the term race as “political,” one participant, Nora, said, “I don’t know whether I’m seeing that as something that has importance in using these books with little kids.” Another, Anne, agreed, saying, “They’re five years old!” Their dismissal, coming at the beginning of what I had hoped would be a long process of consciousness raising throughout the intervention, felt shocking to me. My opinion was that understanding what we were attempting

to teach was as important around race as it was around addition. My PD plans to build understanding around the topics of race and ethnicity were set aside for that time.

In the same meeting, the question was raised of whether their students were even aware of their racial differences and/or if they attached any particular significance to different racial or ethnic groupings. Some participants argued that their students were not, therefore it might be better not to raise student awareness, a key feature of the mission of the research. Quickly, my efforts to raise consciousness among participants shifted toward providing research evidence of young children's' awareness and potential concepts around our topics. With the foundational aspects of my PD plans off track, I found them difficult to return to. Further attempts, including recommending video links on color-blind racism, anti-racist education, etc., were mostly ignored by participants. Lastly, participants decided to teach two books per two-week cycle, rather than one, doubling our workload at each 90 minute meeting and eliminating time for consciousness raising activities. As happened throughout this research project, I came with one plan and quickly needed a different one. Thus, the instructional design shifted and became more action-oriented than self-reflective.

### **Recruitment**

My initial recruitment plan faced several obstacles and in the end took on different forms, from purposeful sampling to snowball sampling. The population I drew my sample from theoretically could have included the roughly fifty kindergarten teachers in the five elementary schools. As the first step, the project was approved by the Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum. There was a significant delay before the board of education formalized the approval and principals were contacted due to change of personnel in leadership. While waiting, I needed to set aside my planned recruitment--seeking volunteers by contacting teachers with information



via the principals. Instead, I began recruiting a purposeful sample of teachers who might want to become participants through recommendations from a supportive board of education member. I recruited two participants this way from two schools. Both were assured that participation was optional and that they could withdraw at any time. One of two, Susan, dropped out after the first meeting due to a medical condition. Eventually, the official approvals came through and principals were contacted by the Assistant Superintendent, and then by me. However, one elementary school principal declined, without explanation, to allow her teachers to participate. Emails went out from principals to all kindergarten teachers at the four remaining schools. The Assistant Superintendent also contacted the district's pre-k center, but the teachers generally felt that their three- and four-year-old students were too young for the approach and content. A sample of the flyer I used for recruitment is in the appendix. Recruitment through the principals brought aboard two teachers from two other schools, who contacted me by email. Lastly, after Susan dropped out, I began a snowball approach to filling her spot by asking remaining participants to ask around for volunteers. Anne found an interested teacher, Laurel, at her local educators' social justice group. Laurel taught at the school where the original principal had declined, but recently she had been replaced. The new principal agreed to Laurel's participation. In the end, my participants included Anne, Nora, Margo, and Laurel, each a kindergarten teacher from a different elementary school.

### **Sample**

The main characteristics of the sample were its small size, with four long-term participants, the representation of different schools, the diversity within the group of participants, and its self-selected nature. By keeping the number small, I was able to look at each participant's data and themes in depth and detail. As Merriam (2009) wrote, "A small, nonrandom, purposeful

sample is selected precisely because the researcher wishes to understand the particular in depth, not to find out what is generally true of the many” (p. 224). Because of my choice of a small sample, I was able to be adaptive to local needs and conditions in my design and decision making. After careful analysis of their statements, actions, and decisions, each teacher’s particular themes emerged. Certain cross-sample commonalities could be found as well as key differences.

The sample ultimately represented four of the five schools in the district, which indicated some breadth of reach and some student population diversity. My desire to reach multiple schools was twofold: I wished to reach varying teachers with varying student populations, and I wished to have a representative based in as many schools as possible with the hope of the intervention eventually being repeated by the original participants with groups of new teachers at each school. Understanding that the district operated several diverse, yet mostly White, elementary schools, and one mostly Black and Latinx school, I hoped to work with participants reaching differing populations for the benefit of differing student perspectives on the read-alouds. However, when Susan dropped out, we lost a representative at the one school with a majority of students of color, and I was unable to find a replacement. I was disappointed because of the missing potential for understanding differences in teaching about race and ethnicity to students of different races and ethnicities. I found it difficult to draw participants attention to variety in the reactions and responses of individual students within their class groups.

Each individual participant naturally brought their own positionality to their work as part of the study group. Considering their positionality and conscious or unconscious perspectives on race, ethnicity, and inequity, as well as topics like racism and discrimination, must necessarily play a role in interpreting their statements, decisions, and stances. Anne was a White woman

with over twenty years of teaching experience, eleven years at her school with kindergarteners. She came to the study through the recommendation of a board of education member with whom we are both acquainted. Her class of approximately 22 five and six year olds was composed of roughly three-fourths White students and one-fourth students of color with a variety of racial and/or ethnic ancestry.

Nora was a White woman with a range of teaching experiences but in her first year with kindergarteners at her school. Nora contacted me after receiving the email flyer from her principal. Her class composition was similar to Anne's in terms of race and ethnicity. Both schools were located in economically wealthy neighborhoods, yet the school zones had been drawn to include some diversity of socioeconomic status (SES). Both Anne and Nora felt that their neighborhoods and most of their students were White and well-off, but that there was some variation within their student groups.

Margo was a woman of color from the Philippines who arrived in the United States at a young age. She had taught a variety of ages for sixteen years, three of them in her current position at her current school. Margo also contacted me after receiving the email flyer from her principal. Her school was in a middle-income neighborhood that was diverse yet mostly White, and she felt that her student demographics matched those of the neighborhood. Margo felt she had observed the school population shifting over her years there as home prices rose and more affluent families moved in who were more likely to be White.

Laurel joined the study group after learning about it from Anne at the local social justice educators group meeting. Laurel was a White woman who had been teaching for 24 years, ten in her current school. Her school had an interesting history around racial diversity. Classes went up to second grade, and it was paired with another school across town for upper elementary. The

neighborhood it drew from had once been predominantly Black. To prevent racial segregation, the district paired Laurel's school with one in a predominantly White neighborhood--one for lower elementary and one for upper--and instituted bussing. The two schools currently had kindergarten through grade two in one building, and three through five in another across town and both schools were integrated. Over the intervening years, both neighborhoods had become predominantly White as home prices rose. Laurel reported that her school and class were predominantly White with some representation of students of color.

It was my assumption that these teachers who volunteered to join the intervention would share the common feature of a personal interest in developing students' awareness of racial equity issues. My expectations were that teachers would share a baseline understanding yet still benefit from PD around race and ethnic difference and teaching for equity. I did not expect to be educating participants around their own bias or inequitable behavior. Pollock (2008) describes the type of teacher I expected to recruit: "We define a teacher prepared to engage issues of race as one who consciously and thoughtfully considers how his or her everyday actions might counteract racial inequality and racist ideas about 'types of people.'" This was generally true of my sample. The participants valued diversity and worked to avoid unconscious bias that might negatively impact students. They each joined the intervention with the hope of actively benefiting students through their teaching through shaping student attitudes.

### **Data Collection**

Data collection spanned a variety of data types and sources. According to the Design-Based Research Collective (2003), DBR, "relies on techniques used in other research paradigms, like thick descriptive data sets, [and] systematic analysis of data with carefully defined measures" (p. 7). My data collection shared this focus on quality and richness of data sets. As

such, I recorded and transcribed whole study group meetings in addition to semi-structured interviews (Patton, 2002) and in-classroom observations. Ultimately, I had nine data sources that ran from the first pre-intervention interview in October of 2017 to the last post-intervention interview in May of 2018. Study group meetings began in December and concluded in early May. Each data source is described below.

**Pre-intervention interviews.** These thirty- to forty-five-minute, audio-recorded, semi-structured interviews took place privately in participants' classrooms before they attended any study group meetings. My goals included building rapport, answering questions about process, and gaining a sense of the participants' background and expectations. Questions were focused on professional background, racial and/or ethnic background of the teacher and her students, history teaching around any social justice issues, and motivation and goals for joining the intervention. The protocol appears in the appendix. I conducted five of these interviews, including Susan who dropped out and Laurel who joined late. I transcribed the recordings myself.

**Study-group meetings.** These ninety-minute working sessions were audio recorded and transcribed by me. Discussions included: semi-structured reporting on previous read-alouds following participant's field notes; reflection on best practices; reading and discussion of next books to be read aloud; development of discussion questions to follow the read-aloud; and selection of subsequent books. In addition, I sometimes provided related material to read to the group such as research or teaching strategy documents. I sometimes brought up questions about previous participant comments, asking for clarification or offering an example of a concept. Side-talk and loosely-related conversation were also captured.

**Agendas.** My planning of meetings was documented through my agenda documents. These reflect my shifting PD strategies and structure of meetings.

**Participants' field notes.** This template document, included in the appendix, was designed with four open-ended questions about the read-aloud experience through which participants recorded their reflections as well as the verbal and non-verbal responses of their students. Participants filled out the template for each book by hand or in a computer document just after their read-aloud. I collected the pages and used them for verification of student comments and to corroborate participants' reflections with those recorded in meeting transcripts.

**Student work samples.** Extension activities were planned for after several read-alouds. Students' work during these activities was documented in photographs taken by participants or by me. These samples provided insight into student thinking about our topics that might not have been captured through their verbal comments. This data was helpful when I analyzed what teaching strategies seemed most helpful to critical thinking. These samples also reflected the participant's degree of commitment to faithfully enacting our curriculum planning in the classroom, at times showing an ambivalence around connecting activities to the topics at hand.

**Email correspondence.** On a regular basis, I communicated by email with participants around logistics as well as several substantive subjects, including: passing along, editing, and developing additional discussion questions; describing extension activities; deliberating over book selection; and sharing resources such as booklists, critical literacy teaching strategies, video links, and more related material. Examination of these conversations in print were helpful for verifying a timeline of decision-making and examining communication around our curriculum development.

**In-class observations.** I conducted one read-aloud observation in each participant's classroom. I took notes by hand and later typed them. The sessions lasted 30 to 45 minutes and included reading of a book and discussion. Using the framework for observations described in

Patton (2002, p. 277), my observations were overt (sitting within earshot), yet I was a non-participant or a pure onlooker. The teacher was cognizant of my purpose: to understand how they personally implement critical literacy practices, not to judge compliance with lesson plans or to critique their performance. The focus of my observations was narrow, concentrating on the teachers' implementation methods and students' degree of attention, responsiveness, and their verbal and nonverbal communication, while I also remained open to unexpected developments. Discussions followed the planned questions as well as spontaneously following student thinking.

**Post-intervention focus group.** I conducted a 60-minute focus group during the last part of our final study group meeting. This was transcribed by me. The questions concentrated on the mechanics of our practice, from meeting structures to book selection process, and ways to improve the intervention. The discussion took place in rounds so that each participant had equal opportunity to answer. The data was used both to address research questions and to revise and finalize a guide for future educator-users. The protocol can be found in the appendix.

**Post-intervention exit interviews.** These 30- to 45-minute semi-structured interviews took place after the conclusion of the study group, privately, in participants' classrooms. Questions centered on participants' personal responses to the work, their feelings about their goals and outcomes, and their comfort or discomfort with the process. These were also audio recorded and transcribed by a transcription service. I re-listened to the audio and verified and edited the transcripts as necessary. This data helped me clarify my impressions of individual participant's experiences with and views on our work.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis was ongoing and continuous throughout the study. All data was collected and transcribed as soon as possible after being recorded. Throughout this process, researcher

memos tracked my thoughts and observations about indicators of apparent themes or patterns, anomalies, or counter-evidence, as well as any decisions made regarding data analysis and the rationale behind them. I compiled the complete data set chronologically and read it through thoroughly. As I read, I began noting and documenting emergent themes and patterns. I used axial coding in light of my research questions as well as in light of these patterns. Inductive codes were added, given sub-themes, or revised as my code tree evolved. Using data triangulation, I was able to “test for consistency” of key themes across sources, while also utilizing the variety of sources to flesh out nuances within these themes (Patton 2002, p. 248).

### **Validity**

Qualitative validity “means that the researcher checks for the accuracy of findings by employing certain procedures” (Creswell, 2014, p. 201). I used triangulation (Merriam, 2009, p. 217) between many data sources, which allowed me to check for consistency by comparing information gathered in different ways and settings and at different points in the research process. “Reliability of findings and measures can be promoted through triangulation from multiple data sources, repetition of analyses across cycles of enactment, and use (or creation) of standardized measures.” These varied sources offered a many-faceted portrait of the process as well as of the four participants. When writing, I used rich description of themes, setting, and subjects to make findings nuanced and realistic.

### **Limitations**

Limitations of this study include the small sample size and the difficulty of replication to validate my finding and theoretical implications. My sample of four is ideally suited to qualitative research as it allows me to attend to more nuances in the data and to dive deeper into themes. However, it naturally makes theorizing and generalizing more circumspect and less



reliable. Because DBR is designed for local, specific solutions to educational needs, interventions are tailored to be very particular with a variety of site-specific factors. As such, “precise replication of an intervention is largely impossible,” (Design-Based Research Collective, 2003, p. 7). Also, because of the many variables of a real-world educational and non-laboratory setting, “causality can be difficult to decipher,” making findings less easily generalized. My role as an ‘objective’ researcher was complicated by my additional role as facilitator of the intervention. “By trying to promote objectivity while attempting to facilitate the intervention, design-based researchers regularly find themselves in the dual intellectual roles of advocate and critic.” I felt this conflict acutely, and sometimes chose to be more passive a facilitator in order to maintain some sliver of objectivity on the research. Other times, I choose to get more actively involved in decision-making within the study group in order to make the intervention more effective for students, potentially sacrificing some evidentiary data that might have supported my findings. These limitations nevertheless do not undermine the findings as much as they point to challenges within DBR and to potential improvements in the intervention structure.

## **Conclusion**

The qualitative research methods described here proved useful for my purposes. A deep and rich picture of the processes and participants emerged. Through DBR, I was able to effect a solution to the problem I perceived in the district while also developing a model program for future use and finding revealing outcomes about the process that may be helpful for the field. Critical literacy provided a pedagogical tool for participants to impart beneficial critical thinking skills to students. The PLC structure for PD seemed well suited to the reflection and collaboration needed when attempting to teach a subject as nuanced as race, ethnicity, and equity

to students. Overall, the design and methods offered an effective approach, while not without room for improvement in future iterations.

## **Chapter Four**

### **Big Goals, Small Steps: Teacher Beliefs Versus Actions**

This chapter will describe the ways participants expressed their social justice goals and viewed their role in resisting racial and ethnic inequity through their teaching. Three participants felt that working to instill unbiased personal attitudes in students would help shape an unbiased society. Two participants also saw their role as empowering students to resist discrimination. The curricular and pedagogical steps participants were willing take ranged from relatively passive to more active. Data presented here will shed light on a contrast between some participants' ambitious goals for social change and their vision of the concrete actions they would take to achieve these goals. This incongruence between big goals and limited actions sometimes produced a tension around participants' choices of what content would be taught. Some shift in participants' willingness to push beyond their own initial comfort level occurred by the conclusion of the intervention. Self-reflection and experiences hearing the insights students gained from the material taught were both factors in the change seen. Each participant's beliefs about their goals and the steps they were willing to take in the classroom will be explored in turn through their interview statements and comments during study group meetings.

#### **Nora: Celebrating Diversity**

Nora's goals for joining the study group had a clear boundary and vision for implementation, perhaps more so than the other teacher participants. The data revealed Nora's approach to teaching the topics of race, ethnicity, and equity: celebrating diversity. She stated often throughout the course of the intervention that she wished for her students to celebrate diversity. "Celebrate" and "positive" are terms that came up often at study group meetings and in her interviews. Here, she describes her goals during her introductory interview.

My hope would be that we are going to do it in a way that my students feel like we're celebrating diversity and we're recognizing the beauty in that and that it makes people like us here in our classroom or all of us in our school or in our town that much richer for it. That's my hope—that we can make that be a celebration and focus on the positives.

By “celebrate,” Nora indicated that she wished for students' emotional response to the material to be joyful and appreciative of the variety of people in the world. By using the term “positives,” Nora pointed to her view of some topics around race/ethnicity as a potentially the inverse, or negative. To Nora, negative appears to have meant an emotional response that was not joyful but uncomfortable or upsetting; in other statements “negative” also meant a divisive force in interracial relationships between individual students. This bipolarity of race topics as positive or negative appeared as a repeated theme within Nora's statements, one that other participants and this researcher also used at times.<sup>1</sup> In respect to Nora's goals, her focus on celebrating diversity and happy emotions of students was intended to enrich students' understanding of racial and ethnic difference, as well as serving as a boundary to exclude discussion of certain relatively more controversial topics. The steps Nora was willing to take fit neatly with her goals and beliefs

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<sup>1</sup> Over the course of the intervention, all of us used the terms negative and/or positive at points. The terms appeared to come to mean to the group: Positive—discussion of race or ethnicity that inspired appreciation of diversity and/or happy emotional responses from students; Negative—discussion of race and/or ethnicity that included descriptions of inequity or injustice or racism that might have created a range of emotional responses including worry, anxiousness, fear, insecurity, or anger. Topics that were deemed negative included segregation, poverty, inequity, bias, discrimination, and racism. By using the term “negative” to describe these topics, an implication was established that these topics were inherently bad to bring before children. This feeling that these topics were bad (negative) was solidified by participants' stated beliefs in children's immaturity, innocence, and purity that might be damaged by upsetting topics and/or non-happy emotions. In the positive/negative dichotomy established, no room was left for social critique by students and/or empowerment for resistance to injustice. In respect to Nora's goals, her focus on celebrating diversity and happy emotions of students was intended to enrich students' understanding of racial and ethnic difference, as well as serving as a boundary to exclude discussion of certain relatively more controversial topics.

about educator's role in resisting racism, although at times she questioned the benefits to students her own vision.

Throughout the intervention, Nora reflected deeply and often on what the teacher's role should be in teaching about race, ethnicity, and equity. In particular, she wondered aloud about whether and how deeply to explore subjects such as bias, discrimination, and racism with students. In the end, at her exit interview, she seemed to have settled on a more passive vision of teachers' role. Nora focused on the development of a multicultural library, but also "openness," which appeared to include creating a safe atmosphere for children to raise any topic they have questions about and being willing to discuss these topics with them. As she shared in our final interview,

A teacher really does have a responsibility to kind of like cultivate a, an environment of openness in the classroom. And that's done through conversation and also through materials. And as um the kindergarten teacher, I really found that kind of like, um, creating the library and being mindful about what kinds of books and what themes were being kind of delved into and what kinds of characters were being depicted, um, kind of was something that I wanted to sort of have a mind to doing that. So I feel that that is a teacher's role. Um, I find it a lot of times maybe those kinds of issues come up both curricularly [sic] and non-curricularly [sic] just in conversation and, and things that happen, um, and being able to just sort of be there to be ready to pipe in with asking questions that help children wonder about issues.

At this point in the exit interview, Nora described a vision of her role consistent with her expressed views throughout the eight study group meetings: that of a passive yet available sounding board and guide. Nora was eager to be open to conversation on any topic at any time,

should students ask. While crucial to creating a supportive environment for children, this was a fairly passive stance for resisting racism.

Nora's passive stance was in fact a fairly firm boundary, as she considered and rejected the concept of raising subjects around inequity and racism with students herself, without their initiating, in this exchange during our second meeting.

Nora: If as we're reading these books our students seem, as we've been mentioning, somewhat oblivious to the racial side of things and their more focused on the girl the boy, the big kid the little kid, the new kid the old kid, do you feel that you'd like for us to try to probe and keep going there into that racial place?

Anne: Like make them aware?

AH: That's a question for us.

Nora: Or should we just keep going with what they seem to be....

Anne: That's what I'd like to do.

Nora: Me too. I have to say I would rather not be putting ...

Anne: Ideas.

Nora: ...this conflict in their head and hearts if it doesn't exist.

Nora came to the conclusion that she did not feel comfortable teaching about racism without students raising the issue first independently. While she felt students should be comfortable raising sensitive topics in her class, she concluded that this was their role, not hers.

During our concluding interview, Nora was still exploring some doubts and contradictions in her thinking. She refers here to her opposition to reading students the nonfiction book *The Skin I'm In: A First Look at Racism*. The book defined racism and gave examples through the illustrations, which depicted situations of discrimination. She opposed using this text

based on a couple of criteria, one of which was that it might in certain ways be psychologically damaging to students. Toward the end of the exit interview she seemed to reconsider.

I am wondering whether it was my, my hesitation deprived the kids of being exposed to that book. And I wonder if in the future maybe I'd figure out a way to do it, to read that book with them because I think there is something really valuable to have that book. It's so, it's so very clearly stating what we want kids to, you know, um, know.... it was saying that, that, you know, we do need to be aware that people are treated unfairly because of the color of their skin or the way their hair looks or the things they may do or their names. Um, and how do we feel about that and what can we do about that? So that's a valuable thing to teach kids. So perhaps a book that's saying it so clearly, even though there was just something about that one that made us all feel a little bit uncomfortable, but being able to teach that very clearly I think is really a good thing to do. Yeah, really a good thing to do.

Nora's second thoughts contradicted her vision of a teacher's role in relation to inequity in education. She seemed, in the end of the process, to struggle with the idea that introducing the information about racism to students might have been beneficial and important, rather than damaging. This shift in her thinking, brought about by deep reflection on what might be best for students, was unprecedented in our work. The opening up of her beliefs about what is important for students to know about racism seemed, at that moment, to overcome her concern about her own discomfort. This change carried weighty implications for her future teaching about race and ethnicity.

**Anne: Commonality and Harmony**

While Nora's goal was to celebrate diversity, Anne's goal for teaching about race and ethnicity was to build harmony. Anne expressed lack of understanding or mystification around perceived racial division among "people," presumably a reference to a wider society, in her introductory interview. In our first interview, Anne described her vision of a common humanity,

Anne: I personally just don't understand, it sounds corny, but I just don't see why people don't get along. You're just a human to me. It doesn't matter what color you are or what religion you are we're just all people and we're all in the same place and we're all going to wind up in the same place someday, or it's just....

AH: So you're hoping to instill that?

Anne: Yes.

Anne sought to subvert potential biased attitudes in her students by instilling ideas of human commonality, that we're all essentially the same. In using the phrase "get along" Anne implies that it is interpersonal conflict that is the heart of racism. This vision of racism does not address the existence of structural inequity, bias, or discrimination. Anne's language around her goals seemed to seek a cessation of interpersonal tension for her students and, as they grow into adults, in the wider society.

The measures she initially took toward harmony included ignoring racial and ethnic differences or treating skin color as a taboo subject. She indicated that she and her students never spoke about race, saying "I work very hard to make color not a big thing. So when we describe each other we don't really talk about the color of our skin. ... It's not really ever discussed."

Anne chose avoidance in seeking harmony. An example of her message of commonality and harmony as taught in past years was the lesson of two eggs, one brown and one white, which is also taught by many early childhood teachers. As she described in our third study group meeting,



Anne decorated each egg shell as a different-looking face, then cracked the eggs to reveal to students that they were both the same inside, connecting this metaphor to skin color of people. This lesson served her goals well, but it overlooked and negated the differences in how people of color are actually treated in society.

At the time of the exit interview, Anne's sense of steps she would take to achieve her goal of racial harmony had evolved somewhat. Her vision was two-pronged. First, she discussed "going deep," referring to text-based classroom discussions. This meant she was willing to guide discussions for rich student talk about racial themes in the text. In the exit interview, she maintained that she had begun encouraging student talk more than before, through which she had heard thoughtful student comments, perhaps even more analytical than she has previously experienced. In the process of encouraging depth of response from students, she had used literature that she might not have chosen in the past due to some serious themes. Here she gave an example. During her exit interview, I asked her what advice she would have for another teacher setting out to teach children's literature about racial inequity. The book she referred to in her reply included a page in which a young Black girl's front door has been marked with the word "die." What she said during her exit interview was revealing of a shift,

I think I would say go deep, because I was really worried about [the] *Something Beautiful* book, but that big, that "die" that, that page I knew was going to be hard, and it brought out such incredible conversation that I'm glad I actually taught it. So I think I would just say go deep, like let them, let's just see how far the kids take it, and go with it until you feel like you might need to stop. But if you feel like you can go with it, go with it.

By "going deep" with her students, Anne took a step to support their ability to think critically about injustice. Anne had found the process of helping her students reflect critically on the

themes of a text worthwhile. The process of teaching critical thinking and hearing student thinking had created an evolution in Anne's approach. By experiencing the process of teaching for critical thinking, and by hearing the resulting insightful and anti-racist commentary of her students, Anne came to a new place in her thinking. As opposed to encouraging the taboo around the subjects that she described in her first interview, she wanted to continue to talk about race, ethnicity, and equity with her students. Anne's view of her role in teaching for racial equity grew significantly, perhaps more than the other participants.

Secondly, Anne believed a teacher's role in resisting racial and ethnicity-based inequity included keeping a multicultural library and toys. She believed classroom literature should include a diverse array of characters that reflect the ethnicities and racial makeup of the students in the class, as she stated in her exit interview,

I think, because in this class I think it was great; we went deep and that was, I thought it was good and much deeper than I've ever gotten. But I also realized that it's okay just to have books in the class that the kids aren't all White little blonde haired White kids, you know, and um, and before I think I always thought there had to be a purpose with the books.

Anne appeared to value both literature with a social-justice message for read-alouds as well as diverse representations in general. She noted a shift in her perspective over time through the study group: While previously she sought out exclusively books with a social-justice message, she later sought out diversity in all her books. There was some contradiction in her description of selecting books, however. While she stated her appreciation of students' ability to think critically about social messages, at the same time she described a backing away from using these books exclusively.

Anne's combined approach of "going deep" with literature and providing a diverse material environment represented both passive anti-bias efforts and active work to shape unbiased individuals in the name of harmony. Her view of educators' role in resisting racism--shaping individual student attitudes--contributed to our work.

### **Susan: Fairness Exists**

Though a short-term participant in our study group who was obliged to drop out for medical treatment, Susan had an interesting and personal take on her goals for teaching about race, ethnicity, and equity. During her introductory interview, Susan answered the question about her motivation for participation by describing a situation in her own home. Her teen-aged children were supporters of the Black Lives Matter movement and opposed violence against Black people by police. Her husband was a local police officer. She summed up the situation at home during her introductory interview,

So...there's the [family name]'s car! There's the Black Lives Matter [sticker] and there's the Blue Lives Matter [sticker] on the other side. But the kids were like, all right, we get it. So it's important to me, and it's an hot topic in our house, and it's been a rough few years talking to my children about, you know, not all police officers hate Black people. In her description, the tension produced at home concerned and consumed her so that when the intervention was presented to her, she wanted to participate.

Yet Susan, who taught in a Black-majority school that did not mirror the wider community, was also concerned about isolation within the study group around differing experiences with student populations. She mentioned this during the interview,

I'd like to see the other teachers' perspective. I don't want you to think I'm going in there with a chip on my shoulder, but nobody is going to have the class make-up that I have so

I'd like to see how they take this. I'd like to hear what their class make-up is as well.

What's the minority in their class? I'm really interested to see how their kids deal with the stories and just see how different it is. It's going to be very different, and I hope that's when I think I'm going to get upset. Because nobody's going to under...[hesitated] I won't have anyone backing me up.

Susan worried that other participants would not understand the differences between the academic and/or social needs of their student populations and hers, or would not believe that differential school funding bore upon her students' learning opportunities and set them behind their peers at other elementary schools. In fact, she feared her responses to misunderstandings and that she might "get upset." The emotion she expressed reflected the intensity with which she experienced talk about race and her protective stance toward her students. Susan also shared concern during her interview about stereotyping of her male students that they would be behind in reading and other subjects, saying "Some of my highest readers leaving kindergarten are Black boys! People are like, Really? Yes they are. I don't understand why that is surprising to people!" Susan not only held high estimations of and expectations for her students, she resisted others' lowering of expectations.

Susan seemed to see her students differently than the others saw their predominantly-White students. Susan believed her students were aware of differences and unfairness, and she expressed her hopes for participation in the intervention with a feeling of urgency. Her goals included particular messages to children that she apparently felt were lacking in the wider social context, including about her high expectations. She described this bluntly in the interview,

That not everybody is out to hurt Black people. I don't want my White students thinking that everybody hates Black people. And I don't want my Black students thinking that I as a White teacher am not going to teach them the way that I should.

Susan's goals were specific to students' thinking about race in their context. Her intended messages appeared aimed at students who may already think in race-based generalizations without necessarily being able or willing to verbalize them. By using herself as a model, she sought to alter potential student misperceptions created outside of her classroom by building ideal conditions of fairness within her class between White people (represented by herself as teacher) and people of color (represented by her students). She wanted her students to believe that racial fairness exists. While it is impossible to know how her goals would have translated into concrete steps in the classroom given her departure from the group, her different beliefs about children, messages about race, and student population would likely have added much discussion to the collaboration. These differences may have also worked to broaden the curriculum, raise our consciousness around students of colors' perspectives, and even might have helped other participants take a more active stance in teaching around their goals.

### **Laurel: Challenging Biases**

Whereas Nora and Anne wanted to shape student's attitudes to be unbiased, Laurel's goal for joining the study group intervention was for her students to leave her class with a firm sense of that racial bias and discrimination are wrong, as she stated in her introductory interview: "I don't want these children to leave my classroom thinking that, you know... that it's okay to treat people badly because of how they look or where they live." By extension, her goal included that students be able to identify discriminatory actions and make choices not to engage in them. Her desire was rooted in her personal and second-hand experiences with racism, which she described

as twin motivations for participation. Steps she wished to take included taking on anti-racist literature in her teaching, but also self-reflection on her own bias and teaching practice.

Laurel, with personal experiences of racism--first, growing up with bigoted family, and second, experiencing second-hand impact from police brutality and racial profiling of a good friend--nevertheless saw her goal for participation in terms of changing and improving herself and her teaching, not changing the outside world. Laurel thought to best serve her students she should self-reflect on potential biases and educate herself to be equitable. Laurel located the responsibility for reform within her herself as an individual, and within other individual teachers personally. During her introductory interview, Laurel described as a crucial first step the professional development around bias and self-reflection that she took part in with other teachers from across the district,

I'll be honest and say I kind of stay in my little cocoon here at [her school]. I think here we do a good job of addressing the issues. I feel like we could do more. That's why I made this my PDP [professional development plan] this year, cause I want to push myself to focus on this area. But district wise? I know Dr. M. [diversity trainer] was coming here and I loved her! I would have taken a course with her at [area university] if I could of. And every time I heard her it was great. But then I heard that some teachers in other schools were offended by her being here, and thought, "You being here means people think I'm a racist." I just, I don't have a great feeling throughout the whole district, and I don't generalize. Like a handful of people, but I have to assume that if a handful of people believe that then there are more people who do, also. It's disappointing that, because it's such a deep process to have to look in yourself and look at your privilege and how you behave because of your privilege and all that. I think it's not as... I just want to

believe better of people, but I think there's a lot of people who aren't ready to do that reflection, to think, "Oh, do I need to look at the way I teach or the way I treat everybody or different groups of people because of the bias I have and maybe don't realize I have?"

So I don't think the district as a whole is in a great place.

Laurel described individual change as dependent on the willingness or defensiveness of White teachers to enact or reject the trainer's recommendation of self-reflection. Laurel reported mixed results of the training, and some lack of confidence in teachers around her.

Seeing inequity as originating in individuals, Laurel took an individual, classroom-level approach to a teacher's role in change. The hesitant word selection in the excerpt below, as Laurel twice switched her terms mid-speech, was indicative of her lack of desire to generalize and criticize fellow teachers. During the interview, she seemed to mediate her hesitance to blame by including herself as a potential actor in enacting bias,

And mostly all the teachers would be looking at themselves to see, "Am I doing something unknowingly?" And tar—... pegging Black students as lower func—... lower academically or whatever. Because if I was doing it, and if I'm doing it, I would want to know. [She laughs.] But not everybody wants to know that stuff, so it's hard.

As she switched from the words "lower functioning" to "lower academically or whatever," Laurel seemed to grapple with her own use of appropriate terms for lowered expectations for students of color. This could be interpreted as Laurel self-editing as part of her efforts to be reflective on her own bias. Overall, Laurel appeared to take responsibility for her own part in reproducing inequity and to expect other teachers to do the same.

The self-interrogation Laurel advocated was just one aspect of her vision of a teacher's role in resisting inequity. Laurel also believed she should build her skills in leading discussions

around equity themes. As she stated, “This is important to me, and I do want to, I want to better myself in the area of knowing how to address these issues with the students and then take it beyond that.” “These issues” could be assumed to have referred to race, ethnicity, and equity topics, the themes of the intervention. Laurel wanted to be prepared and know what to say.

Though her statement was somewhat vague in her second goal (“take it beyond that”), it could be inferred that she wanted to first inform students, then do more than just inform, perhaps empower them. It was notable that Laurel did not address seeking racial and multi-ethnic harmony, as did Anne, but instead had a goal of raising students’ awareness of discrimination through discussion. During the concluding focus group, she stated, “My goal was to really be a part of this and delve deeper into particular books and really do the challenging work.”

“Challenging work” parallels Anne’s “going deep,” presumably indicating giving students opportunities for discussion and critical thinking about the text and issues. In a comment that contrasted with Anne’s shift toward diverse books but away from social-justice books, Laurel reported that using literature to nurture social consciousness in children was a key part of her role. This comment, also during the focus group, reflected her preference for books with justice themes: “I just liked going deeper with very specific books, um, that were chosen for a reason, as opposed to just, oh the characters have different colored skin.” While not undervaluing the presence of multicultural texts in the classroom, Laurel seemed to feel that this alone was insufficient to fulfill her responsibilities toward educating students about race and ethnicity or to achieve her desired impact on her students’ social consciousness and future behavior.

Laurel’s goals were to shift society away from racism by instilling a sense of racial fairness in her students that would help them make nondiscriminatory choices throughout their



lives. To do this, she was willing to teach critical thinking about injustice. This action brought Laurel to a more active stance than merely shaping student attitudes about diversity.

### **Margo: Resistance and Dialog**

Margo's goals for teaching about race, ethnicity, and inequity included preparing students to recognize and resist racial discrimination when they encountered it. She did not locate racism as primarily within her students and their potentially biased attitudes, as Nora, Anne, and Laurel did. Instead, Margo saw racism in society impacting her students. Margo hoped to achieve her goals of awareness and preparedness to resist through steps including building students' critical thinking skills about discrimination through the literature we used. Another crucial step Margo believed in was in some ways similar to Laurel's vision of teachers' need for self-reflection around bias toward students. Margo strongly rejected stereotyping students, especially low-income students of color, personally and among teachers in general. Margo intended to be equitably demanding of all her students. The final step Margo advocated stood out from other participants: she hoped to build the interconnectedness of teacher, students, and the local community through dialog around these issues. Collective discussion, she believed, could lessen instances of racism in the community as a whole.

Margo's belief that discrimination did and would impact her students stemmed from her personal experiences of feeling ethnically isolated as a child and from her previous teaching experience working with low-income students of color in a racially and economically segregated school. Her experiences shaped her perspective on children and teaching as well as motivating her to take part in the intervention. When asked about her motivation for joining the study, Margo cited her own upbringing as an immigrant of color from the Philippines living in predominantly White communities, her feelings of ethnic isolation, and her wish for more

diversity around her own children. During our first meeting, Margo described this personal toll beginning as early as age six, the age of kindergarten students. As an example, she described her emotional relationship as a girl to Barbie dolls and to her name,

I just remember growing up, I was born in the Philippines and I moved here when I was four. I always had Barbies, loved Barbies, oh, her long blonde hair, and I just loved her, but I was none of those things. When I saw Whoopi Goldberg do the t-shirt over her head thing [pretending it was long hair], I was like, “Oh, I did that all the time!” [Group laughter.] Long, blonde, beautiful hair. [Gestures, sweeping her hands through her long, dark hair.] So I felt being, like, I felt like I’m almost the opposite of who Barbie was. And I guess I always noticed I’m the only Asian person around. I’m the only person that stands out every place I go. Like at birthdays. So I don’t know, I guess I always [thought], “I wish my name was Stacie!” Everyone always thought my name was [Margaret] not [Margo], even thought [Margo] is not a very Filipino name, but it’s different, so everyone was always saying it wrong, and I was always, “Uh, I wish my name was Jennifer!”

While not describing any overt discrimination from her White peers, the lack of equal representation and diversity in her social world--be it hair, toys, or names--caused discomfort around her identity and an unequal psychological burden in relation to her White peers. Margo did not place blame, but clearly identified a cultural problem.<sup>2</sup> Margo stated that as she grew older she recovered her appreciation of her ethnic identity; nevertheless her example of the impact of underrepresentation was clear.

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<sup>2</sup> This problem was addressed in the three other participants’ desire to have multicultural libraries and toys in their classrooms, suggesting movement toward greater equity in some students’ school environment.

Margo's experiences appeared to have created empathy for others in similar situations and pointed toward her identification with the students of color in her class. She aimed to approach students from a variety of backgrounds without bias or assumptions. During her exit interview, she connected bias she endured to her resistance to prejudging students,

Just growing up and um just the way, how I felt I was treated, and it's just, you know, just trying to be open and thinking fairly about, um, kids that you sort of assume this or that about someone just because of their color of their skin and [how] they look or where they're from.

Here, Margo directly connected her experiences to stereotyping of students of color by teachers. She rejects this. In addition to her childhood experiences shaping her perspective, Margo pointed to previous years teaching in a nearby urban district. She taught in a "Talented and Gifted" (TAG) school that existed separate from the general education program in the same building. She found these schools to be highly racially segregated and inherently inequitable based on curricular differences and resource provision. She reflected on the experience in her introductory interview,

The majority of my students who were from the projects and, but if they were not from the projects they were bussed in from [distant neighborhood] or other parts of the city. And those majority of kids were White and they were all in the TAG classes. So it was a very obvious line if you walked into a room. It was very bothersome for me, and I only taught as high as second grade. But they [the students] know. I got out of TAG. I just was like I can't teach this anymore. The rest of the time I was in a regular classroom. And it was nice. It was more diverse. It felt right.... It just ends up dividing a school. And unfortunately, a lot of times, it ends up being across racial lines.

Margo stated that it not only upset her to see stark racial inequity in her school, but that the students, too, were aware of it. She subsequently exited the TAG program for the general education school to avoid implication in the reproduction of inequity for low-income students of color.

In addition to violating her sense of fairness, the experience of teaching in both the TAG program and the general education program contributed to her increased empathy for the parents and students she served, who were predominantly people of color. Margo believed that due to the intractability of poverty and its devastating impact on their lives, her general education students struggled in school. Feeling that many teachers lack understanding of students' life challenges and trauma, she suspected that teacher biases around poverty and achievement may impact teachers' attitudes toward and treatment of poor students of color. Her subsequent vision for creating educational equity was to provide the general education students with rich curriculum and challenging teaching. Regarding her time teaching in the nearby city, Margo remarked,

I would try to make our classroom experience as rich as possible. It didn't matter that we didn't have much money or the parents didn't give. I came up with a lot of things or we figured out how to do it. I just wanted to make sure they had those kind of really rich experiences in the classroom. That's how I tried to make up for it, or I don't know if that's the right word, or... And even though we weren't the gifted class, I wasn't teaching it like I was going to lower my expectations of them. I always expected the best or pushed or knew that they could do it. And they would try their best, and we would try, "How could we do better?" I guess I reflected [teaching for equity] that way.

She appeared to believe her responsibility was primarily to push her students equally regardless of their demographics and to pull forth their analytical ability. Margo demonstrated her

commitment to equity for her general education students by demanding they do their best and maintaining high expectations. The same applied to her current students in our district.

Margo reported choosing a challenging text for its critical thinking potential in regard to the book *Amazing Grace*. In the story, the character Grace is told by her teacher that she can't be Peter Pan in the school play because she's Black. Even as other teachers felt the book was too challenging for their young students, Margo appeared to relished the challenge. She described this exchange during our third study group meeting,

A couple of the other teachers were like, "Oh, it's so long. It's so hard." I was like, "Nope, I'm gonna keep it," because it shows diversity, it's difficult to talk about, and I don't think we should "dumb-down" or, like, think that our kids can't talk about it. Okay, they may not get it at first, but if you read it over and over they will. And I think that's what I feel about some of these books is that you're taking them, you're reading them, you want them to notice the differences, but it's also an opportunity for us [to say], "Well, what would you have done?" or "What would you say if you see [discrimination against a student of color] happening?" or maybe taking that next step and saying, "If you see that happening, what do you think you should do? What can you say?" That would be maybe some good, you know, making them talk about it. Getting it in their world in some way. Getting them thinking about it. If they see it happening--and they might see it happening more as they get older.

She wanted to challenge her current students to not only consider injustice, but to be empowered to challenge discrimination by preparing their thoughts and planning responses. Since she felt it was likely that her students would eventually encounter bias and discrimination, even among their teachers, Margo believed teaching this book would support their development as actors

against discrimination. Margo's approach to critical thinking and empowerment represented the most active stance among the participants.

For Margo, teachers' role in building racial and ethnic equity also included being part of dialog among adults about these topics that extends from the school into the community. She advocated for collective communication around the bias and discrimination that existed in the district, feeling that the repeated occurrence of bias incidents in the schools and community demonstrated such a need. Margo centered the importance of dialog around racial equity, and located the responsibility with the adults of a community, while also seeing an active role for students. She explained her vision of widening circles of dialog during her exit interview,

It's a good conversation to have within your school community if you can. If you can have that opportunity to discuss these things that are going to be brought up, or going to be discussed.... It's hard to have those big community conversations, I think. But starting small, you start in the classroom, you start at school, you are, you start at, you know, small. And then hopefully that feeling grows or the conversation grows. But I think it does, it does start with the kids.... Just maybe if you're having the conversation with them or, and then it starts... The adults are the ones who are out there in the community, but maybe if we started this with the kids in the schools, as they get older, they're bringing that with them throughout their lives. Not just, you know, hopefully they're taking those good messages outside of the classroom from school.

Not only did Margo hope her work in the classroom might impact the wider community through dialog, but also aimed for students to continue these conversations as they grew older. Dialog as the cornerstone of change was a central theme for Margo.

Margo's stated goals for teaching about race, ethnicity, and inequity were focused on improving her students' critical skills to prepare them for resistance. Her goal was potentially attainable given her the steps she took: rejecting stereotypes, maintaining universally high expectations of her students, and teaching critical thinking about race and discrimination. Her active steps thus go beyond equitable representation of diverse groups and beyond teaching appreciation of diversity to critical thinking about race and empowerment of students to be as actors against injustice. Margo also envisioned potentially building dialog across the community at all ages to address local racism. Thought outside the study group's perview, this goal was central to Margo's beliefs about her role in reducing discrimination.

### **Conclusion**

Participants all agreed that teachers had a role in educating to promote racial and ethnic equity. Their more specific goals and their visions of concrete steps in the classroom toward these goals varied. The variation shown can be characterized as a more passive role to a more active role. The more passive role included creating an in-classroom environment of openness to discussion of so-called sensitive topics as they were brought up by students themselves as well as creating multicultural representations of students' racial and ethnic variation through books and toys selected by the teacher. This vision of teachers' role focused on supporting the children within the classroom in "seeing themselves" and "feeling safe" to discuss their ideas about anything including race, ethnicity, and equity.

Movement in classrooms toward greater representation of diverse populations in materials and books has grown in recent decades in part through the multicultural education movement that developed in response to the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s and African Americans' work for greater rights and equity (Banks & Banks, 2010). This, however, is the

“entry-level” of multicultural education, almost a minimum requirement, while according to Banks and Banks, multicultural education in fact constitutes a movement for school transformation and includes student action for social change as part of the curriculum. Simply buying new toys and books and being willing to answer students’ questions honestly are valuable goals, but using this more passive approach actually had the effect of limiting what content participants taught to students in terms of racial and ethnic injustice and empowerment. I draw a parallel between this approach and Beverly Daniel Tatum’s (1997) moving walkway toward White supremacy, where standing still is not actively walking toward the destination of racism, but will still move you in the same direction. Participants were refusing to walk toward racism, were rejecting active racism, but some were unintentionally preserving the status quo through passivity.

The middle ground vision of teachers’ role included the above, plus using collective discussion of our themes to develop critical consciousness in students as a lifelong perspective. Developing critical consciousness as part of a literacy curriculum is an element of liberatory education, as Freire envisioned it. “Freire’s work was centered on key concepts, which included the notion that literacy education should highlight the critical consciousness of learners” (Vasquez, 2017, p. 2). This moderate vision of participants’ role was directed toward shaping the individual students as well as outward toward societal change, hoping that their students might be able to bring about change as unbiased and non-discriminatory adults. As the majority of participants conceived of racism as racist individuals, as most White people are raised to believe (McIntosh, 1989), they taught to shape students’ racial attitudes. Structural racism and societal change were not taught about, so could not have become part of their students’ critical consciousness. This middle-ground approach focused on students in a deficit model as potential



future racists that needed fixing, not liberating them to challenge racist social system, which is also a key element of critical pedagogy “as a way of making visible and examining relations of power to change inequitable ways of being” (Vasquez, 2017, p. 2). This vision of educators’ role might be compared to walking backwards on Tatum’s (1997) moving walkway, resulting in staying in one place: preventing racial bias in individuals does not empower anti-racist action or end structural racism.

In addition, the emphasis on preventing the development of bias in students showed a problematic underlying assumption about the race or ethnicity of students. One could argue that these participants were thinking primarily about preventing their White students from growing up racist. Their classes were predominantly White, though not exclusively. Ignoring the needs and emotional responses of their students of color would have been myopic and a symptom of White privilege. There is some evidence that we could have done more to tailor our read-alouds to a broader range of students simply in the low number of times students of color were brought up in our meetings. Also as evidence, Susan, whose students were mostly children of color, had very different goals for her participation in the intervention; she wanted her students to believe she was fair and unbiased against them. Had Susan remained a participant, it is likely that our awareness of the experiences students of color through the read-alouds would have been greater.

A more active stance included efforts to empower students to personally reject and resist discrimination. Through developing skills in social critique, students ideally would have been able to stand up for themselves or one another when they encountered bias. This was the goal of their efforts for some participants, and teaching critical thinking through discussion was a key step. Empowerment was a more inclusive goal in that all participants’ students were intended

recipients of this message, and all could benefit. This active stance was a crucial part of our work but was not consistent across participants or throughout our work.

Because of key obstacles, we did not fully achieve active anti-racist teaching. Turning around and running against Tatum's walkway would have included aspects of each participant's pedagogical steps, plus creating a greater place for student critical thinking about racist social structures and for learning about collective resistance. While each participant desired broad anti-racist social change, they were more or less willing to translate this into active steps. Choosing to leave out of the curriculum a book about racism and not to use the term "racist" were key indicators of the obstacle explored in this chapter: that participants' social justice goals in general did not match with their curricular and pedagogical choices. The gap came about in large part due to discomfort with the topics and resulting avoidance, as explored in the next chapter.

## **Chapter Five**

### **Loaded Words: How Struggles with Race Talk Shaped the Curriculum**

This chapter demonstrates how, in the struggle to figure out how to address race in kindergarten, the curriculum the study group designed became limited in its engagement with race, ethnicity, and inequity due to participants' avoidance as well as to the challenges of direct talk about racism. The data suggests participants struggled to engage in race talk with students that satisfied both their comfort levels and their anti-racism goals. Due to avoidance, participants rejected books with relevant themes, suggested discussion questions and extension activities unrelated to our focus, and/or implemented extension activities incompletely. In some cases, students' thoughtful and relevant comments were acknowledged then allowed to pass by without follow up. My passive facilitation also contributed by not openly communicating with participants on avoidance of race talk. The underlying dynamic in this avoidance and passivity was our difficulty in being candid and direct about our own choices around our developing curriculum. In some ways, speaking to young children about racism seemed an easier task than talking to one another about it. In conclusion, despite our best intentions and efforts at communication, our overlapping discomfort manifest in a somewhat limited curricular outcome.

### **Limiting Our Curriculum**

We did not plan the curriculum completely in advance, but rather it constantly evolved, so its limitations emerged gradually as well. Because I designed the study group to be collaborative and cumulative, the curriculum came into being one meeting and read-aloud at a time. I recommended several books, some of which the teachers accepted and taught. We chose other books collectively. We all suggested discussion questions, most of which participants used with students during read-alouds. When claiming that the curriculum was "limited" during the

course of the intervention, I mean that we made “safe” decisions along the way to exclude discomforting topics in students’ experience of the intervention.

**Book selection and rejection.** Books participants suggested and selected tended to contain messages around diversity, inclusion, and commonality. In general, books participants chose avoided controversial topics such as bias, discrimination, or inequity. In her introductory interview, Anne described human commonality as a message she intended to convey to her students, in one instance by using the two-eggs lesson. Nora mentioned celebrating diversity as her intended theme. These two messages showed in their selection of books, especially *Same, Same But Different* and *Bein’ With You This Way*, the two books participants chose to conclude the intervention. The first depicted a pen pal relationship between two boys, one White in the United States and the other brown skinned in India. The boys compared and contrasted their lives and contexts through the ways that they are different and yet essentially the same: both have pets, though one has a dog and the other has cows and chickens, etc. The second book was a rhyming chant set in a playground where children of many skin tones and visible ethnicities played together. The book described the characters’ physical differences as well as their love of play and a happy atmosphere. Neither book dealt with inequity, bias, or discrimination, therefore empowerment and change were not part of their messages.

Participants rejected books that included more overt messages about racism, inequity, and empowerment for resistance. The first book I suggested was *An Angel Just Like Me*, which I recommended to participants by email,

Here is a link to a book I thought would be great to squeeze in before the winter break, after our 12/20 meeting. Reviews below, and a link if you'd like to see the cover image. Please let me know your thoughts when you have a chance so I can order copies or not.

The book is set at Christmas time when an African American boy searched stores for a tree-top angel that looks like him, but found only White, female angels. The theme was unequal representation, and in the end, a friend made him a Black, boy angel for his tree.

Underrepresentation of Black and Brown people in popular culture is widespread and can be demeaning, as Margo's story about Barbie dolls demonstrated. For young children, identification with a character who critiques this phenomenon and subverts it has the potential to be powerful and empowering. Participants objected to, and quickly rejected, the book out of concern that reading about a religious holiday would upset parents and/or not be allowed by school or district policy.

A prominent theme for avoidance of uncomfortable teaching was fear of upsetting parents. Fear of breaking a specific district policy was unique to this book. Participants, first Anne and then Susan, sent the email responses below that represent these two concerns,

Although I think the book looks great, I am not sure about bringing angels into a conversation is going to be widely received. I could be wrong and would love to hear other peoples' opinions on it. I just know from past conversations with some very opinionated parents this might be a tough conversation to have at school.

I agree with [Anne]. The district does not allow us to teach religious holidays. I have always invited parents to come into my room and discuss their holiday traditions however, I myself do not teach them. I would not feel comfortable reading this book in my classroom.

While Anne was concerned about parent backlash, Susan cited district policy. She made the distinction between parents introducing a holiday, and her, as the teacher and district employee,

doing the same. Participants passed over the book not because of the theme of unequal representation, but because it dealt with Christmas, contrary to policy.

Participants rejected the book *The Skin I'm In: A First Look at Racism* not because of school or district policy, but due to fear of parent backlash as well as to participants' own discomfort with the topic of racism. The nonfiction book presented diversity as natural richness. Its illustrations depict children with many shades of skin as well as from many cultures around the world, as shown by their clothes and hairstyles. Ancestry and genetic inheritance is mentioned briefly as the reason behind physical traits such as skin color, and race is defined on page nine as "the history of your family," a combination of ancestry and geographical origin. The book has flaws; for example, the menorah is drawn with seven candles, not nine, and on page 13 it states that "anybody of any skin color can be a racist," which is highly debatable. Being selective about which pages or sentences to read to students was one strategy I recommended to participants for dealing with these flaws. Few, if any, other books in circulation at the time addressed racism so directly.

The key advantage of the book was the clarity with which it described racism and the accessibility for young children of the examples in the illustrations. For example, on page 12, a family who have brown skin are shown being told by a White boy and man that they can't come into a gated park. On page 14, a brown-skinned boy is told he can't play ball with friends by White children; they grab his shoulder as if they are bullying him. On page 18, an ice cream seller gives a White boy a larger scoop on his cone than a girl of color. These images are relatable to children and, in my experience, elicit reactions of outrage, empathy, and feelings of interracial solidarity. Also on page 12, racism is defined essentially as beliefs of individual people: "Some believe that people from their race are worth more and should be treated better

than people from other races. A person who thinks and acts this way is called a racist.” This is one way to think of racism, although it is limited to individual actors and does not address systemic racism or oppression of one group by another through structural means. Nevertheless, this book provided a working definition that was a useful foundation for introducing racism and inequity. It provided a framework for understanding interpersonal discrimination. Arguments for rejecting *The Skin I’m In* centered around fear of parent backlash and discomfort with the definition of racist in the text, shifting over time from the first rationale to the second.

In an early study group meeting, Anne argued for rejecting the book not because of its flaws or its appropriateness for children, but from fear of backlash,

Anne: We have some very vocal parents at my school, especially one, and I could see her making a very, very big deal about it if her daughter doesn’t see this and suddenly goes home saying, “We’re talking about the brown children and the...,” you know. I just think that letting it take its own course and see where it goes...

Nora: I’m more comfortable with that.

Anne: And I think if that’s what they notice, they might in this book [points to *The Other Side*, a book about racial segregation]. That’s great if they notice it, but if they don’t even better maybe.

Nora: Yeah, exactly.

Anne’s argument was against talking about race and racism for fear of upsetting parents, in this case as well with *An Angel Just Like Me*. Parent backlash was a very real and consequential phenomenon in the Maintown community, where jobs had been lost in the past over insensitive situations. Anne’s rationale for rejecting *The Skin I’m In* and use of the term “racist” led her to also suggest that the group avoid mentioning racial inequity even in *The Other Side*, a book

specifically set in a racially segregated community. Anne thought it might be “even better” if students did not comprehend the content of the book, since the content might be contentious and lead to parent backlash. Nora agreed. In the same meeting, Margo also agreed with Anne that parents would likely be upset and react negatively to *The Skin I’m In*. However, when the two White participants, Anne and Nora, revealed their opposition to teaching about racial inequity in *The Other Side*, Margo remained silent. Margo’s silence may have been agreement or disagreement, but in either case, her direct opinion on the purpose of the intervention was not shared. The purpose of the professional development intervention itself was called into question by this desire to avoid “race talk” with students when using both books, and potentially others.

My response did not address participants’ discomfort and fear head-on, but less directly summed up my belief in the purpose of our work for children. At the same meeting, I stated,

By starting early you’re trying to prepare kids for what might come up, and give them skills so they know what to do when it happens. And the other point I’d make is that although I totally hear what you’re saying, that’s fine with me if that’s the way we decide to go, but, this [*The Skin I’m In*] is very clear that sometimes people treat people very differently because of the way they look.

Flustered by Anne and Nora’s apparent rejection of our mission, I argued in somewhat confusing language that young students needed the capacity to recognize and resist racism, hoping this would encourage them to recommit to our goals. After the winter break had passed and before our next meeting, I emailed participants to put consideration of *The Skin I’m In* on the agenda, this time with a more coherent argument for reading it to students,

I’m going to suggest we tackle the book *The Skin I’m In: A First Look at Racism* at our next meeting. It is a great explanation of bias and discrimination with clear examples to



talk over with your kids through the illustrations. And it really gets at the heart of what we're trying to teach them in this group. It will lay the groundwork for later books that include racial themes less explicitly but importantly, like *Each Kindness* or *Last Stop on Market Street*.

By using the phrase, “gets to the heart of what we’re trying to teach,” I was essentially stating that inequity was a key focus for our work, and that empowering students through awareness of inequity was an important goal. This was a thinly veiled reference to the obligations of membership in a group claiming to resist racism. In other words, I called on them to get on board with our mission. This subtle message was about as direct as I would get in this debate as the rationales around rejection of the book evolved.

My argument for the book was centered on the advantages of the text, avoiding the serious threat of parent backlash, which was out of my control, and ducking direct confrontation of what struck me at the time as potentially the White participants’ background discomfort with the topic itself. In retrospect, addressing students’ needs may have been emotionally easier for me than confronting head-on participants’ discomfort with teaching about racial inequity. I chose this argument in what I suspect was my unconscious attempt to preserve the group’s working relationship and rapport, as well as to avoid my own discomfort with confrontation around race. I felt that had we explored the rationales participants used more directly and deeply, we could have either undermined or strengthened our mission. Calling out participants’ behavior as not truly anti-racist was too close to accusing them of not really caring about racism. In a group that had self-selected to address racial and ethnic inequity through their work, that seemed unfair and alienating, and I did not want to lose their participation and good will. However, giving priority to stabilizing relationships over confronting problematic behavior, or wanting to “be nice,” is an

unproductive stance when confronting racism. This was the first substantial difficulty of the intervention, talking openly among one another about avoidance of race talk with students.

The root of resistance to the book was originally fear of parent backlash, but other sources for the resistance were cited by White participants. At the following meeting, I gave each participant a copy of *The Skin I'm In* to read, and we went through it page by page discussing the merits and problems of the text and illustrations. Several additional arguments against reading the book were raised (avoidance rationales that were explored in the previous chapter), but participants agreed to take copies with them to re-read and to consider adaptations, including skipping lines or pages that made them uncomfortable. Anne suggested taking the book to her social justice educators group to gather their opinions. The social justice group members reportedly objected to the depiction of racist individuals in the text. Anne's subsequent email reporting on their feedback attempted to re-contextualize participants' fear of upsetting parents as discomfort with the book's flaws,

The book was passed around and there was not one person in the room that thought it was a good book. Their thoughts are that introducing the word in kindergarten is not the problem but the way it is defined and described in this book was poorly done. Perhaps that is what was giving us such hesitation. Maybe we can find a book that works better. No one liked the idea of how it was defined and that it was basically, "once a racist always a racist." Or if you are a racist you are a bad person with no other redeeming qualities.

I am going to do some searching on amazon and see what I can find and if there are any other books we can look at.

I also showed it to my teammates at work and none of them said that they'd read that book to their class. Whatever it is that is making us comfortable might not be the word but actually how the book is explaining it.

Anne's comments reveal her thoughtful contemplation of the source of her discomfort. On one hand, her shifting rationales indicate her struggle and confusion. Her disequilibrium is indicative of conflicting impulses to avoid discomfort yet examine and understand it. On the other hand, her shifting explanations could be indicative of unconscious masking of her discomfort with confronting racism through faulting the book. Her concerns described here centered on a depicting racist individuals as unequivocally "bad" people. She seems to be calling for greater nuance in depiction of racial bias in individuals.

This defensive stance around racist people was not approval of racism, but a call for more depth and neutrality that comes from a White perspective. As a White person, I feel that our own unconscious racism or inadvertent offense is a deep fear, and many of us fear of being held accountable to the same level as someone who is an active bigot. We do not want to be "painted with the same brush" because we intuitively understand that we can be good people and still racist. Yet when White people are told we have been racist, we experience it as if we were told we are bad people. Like children afraid of being chastised, we fear being called out more than we fear our own racist acts. In this context, Anne's defensive stance reflected a fear of consequences of racist behavior (people being called out) that overrode the motivation of empowering students to call out racism. Anne took the perspective that a book that seeks to define racism should acknowledge that racism also exists inside good people. This may ease this internal struggle for White adults, while making room for them to call out their own participation in racism. Such a book would be valuable. Nevertheless, the outcome for our group was rejection of *The Skin I'm*

*In* and narrowing of our curriculum to exclude a concrete definition of racism including bias and discrimination in a contemporary setting. This struggle--to position oneself as opposed to racism while being aware of one's own potential racism and fearful of being unmasked--is powerful and complex emotionally and should be considered a key element of White identity development.

**Discussion question development.** The group's process for developing discussion was collaborative and inclusive. As one of us read the book aloud, we shared comments and suggestions for questions. At the end of the book we briefly discussed themes we hoped students would take away, but as this was close to the end of the meetings, this part of the conversation often was cut short. Afterwards, as I transcribed the meetings at home, I typed up the questions emailed them to participants. I would include all questions suggested, omitting none, and typically followed up with my own suggested questions as well, especially when I felt the group had left out key themes or critical-thinking questions.

My decision to include all questions suggested by participants resulted in some undesirable outcomes. First, the classroom read alouds sometimes took longer than teachers had to spend or the young students could sit and pay attention. Participants reported rushing the discussions or breaking the read-alouds over two days. A critical eye on whether or not the questions were tied to desired student takeaways about our topics would have helped. Secondly, simple comprehension questions sometimes dominated the list of questions, which also occasionally focused on interpreting imagery or other reading skills, when critical thinking queries would have better supported student synthesis of key ideas. What follows are examples of questions that fall into these categories, along with explanations of the connected texts for context. Lastly, and perhaps most crucially, the questions sometimes had nothing to do with our topics, which wasted our opportunity to teach about these important concepts. When the

suggested questions did not address race, ethnicity, or equity, and I nevertheless reproduced them faithfully, enacting a passive facilitation that was unconsciously complicit with avoidance.

***Questions related to race, ethnicity, and equity.*** These examples of discussion questions were related to themes of race, ethnicity, and equity in the books. *The Other Side* depicted girls from opposite sides of a fence that divided a racially segregated town. The White girl, Annie Paul, attempted to befriend the main character, a Black girl named Clover. Gradually, Annie found her way across the fence, and the book concluded with a group of new playmates sitting on top of the fence, with Annie saying, “Someday somebody’s going to come along and knock this old fence down.” Questions participants suggested for this read-aloud included:

Why did Clover’s mama say not to go over the fence?

Why did Sandra [one of Clover’s friends, a Black girl] say, “no” [when Annie asked to join jump rope]?

Why did Mama say, “Because that’s the way things have always been?”

These questions asked students to demonstrate their understanding of what segregation is and how it worked. They asked for recall of some history of racial inequity that is important for students to know. The choice to use “why” questions went beyond only comprehension to help illuminate of individual characters’ motivations. Participants used these questions to ask students to think more analytically about the feelings behind the story, in particular Mama and Sandra’s fear of transgressing social and legal rules.

I felt that these questions and the responses they set up were strongly connected to our mission, and could be extended with small additions. I wanted to draw on students’ strong sense of fairness to steer conversation toward the story’s theme of empowerment for change. I added

the following questions that I had found helpful when teaching the book myself in the past. In the following email to participants, I wrote,

Personally, I always add something about "fairness" (as I mentioned), and I think the page to do that on is actually the first page, where it says "White people lived on the other side." I usually start with, "Who lived where?" "Why was there a fence between?" "Is that fair?" Then I revisit it at the end with, "why do the girls want the fence torn down?" "Would that be better? More fair? Why?"

My first two suggested questions were additional comprehension questions to ensure students understood the segregation the characters were living under and later challenging. I planned the last four questions to ensure students could express their critical reactions to racial inequity specifically. The questions called students to critique historical segregation itself, based in the context of the book. Also, students' ideally could step back from the text slightly to consider their own thoughts and opinions. Overall, the mix of recall, comprehension, and critical questions helped students access the themes of young people's solidarity and empowerment against racial oppression.

*Gloria and Rosa Make Beautiful Music* was a story I found on the Teaching Tolerance website and was designed to be used in social justice lessons. Since it was not a picture book, we had only one illustration copied from the website. In the illustration, Gloria appeared White and Rosa had slightly darker skin and was given implied Latinx ancestry signified by speaking Spanish. The girls compared their schools, and noted that while Gloria's school had musical instruments, Rosa's school only had chorus since it did not have funds for instruments. The inequity is resolved by the girls attending a PTA meeting and lobbying successfully for funding to buy instruments for Rosa's school.

Our questions for this read-aloud addressed ethnicity and inequity, yet not in conjunction. The first set of questions were designed to establish Rosa's ethnicity,

Does anyone know what the word "abuela" means?

What language is she speaking?

Why is she speaking Spanish?

Where are her ancestors from?

The second set of questions utilizes comparison to *The Other Side* to draw out themes of equity and the girls' actions for change,

How does this book compare to *The Other Side*?

How did Clover and Annie Paul want to change things to be more fair?

How do Gloria and Rosa want to make their schools more fair?

These questions, like those for *The Other Side*, aimed to draw out student's reflection on what it means to be equitable in the context of the story. These also emphasize children's empowerment to make change through their choices and actions. These questions were strongly related to equity.

In hindsight, there was room for more critical discussion around *Gloria and Rosa*. We could have added questions that pointed out to students and asked them to reflect on the link between race/ethnicity and economic inequity in the story. For example, we might have asked, "What do you think the schools were like in *The Other Side*? Would they have been separated or all together? Do you think the schools in *Gloria and Rosa* might be separated by skin color, like the town is separated in *The Other Side*?" With only the questions we planned, students generally struggled to connect these elements of the story, and in fact, it was not explicit in the story that the schools were segregated racially or ethnically as well as economically. Also, we

could have included questions that abstracted and personalized the story, such as “What would you do if this happened in our town?” The discussion questions for these two books overall made solid efforts to provoke comprehension of inequity as well as critical thinking about ethnicity and class and fairness, though not intersectionality.

***Questions unrelated to race, ethnicity, and equity.*** Questions suggested by participants that did not connect to the themes of our mission predictably elicited little thinking around race, ethnicity, and equity. *Something Beautiful* was from a Black girl’s point of view as she saw dilapidation, vandalism, homelessness, and danger in her all-Black neighborhood. She set out to ask each neighbor what they find beautiful in their lives, and ended up with many sources of happiness, including that she herself is her mother’s “something beautiful.” The beauty she found in her community empowered her to clean the graffiti off her front door (the word “die” is scrawled there), to clean up her building, and to feel powerful. Discussion questions mostly asked for comprehension and recall, with some connection-to-self questions, one call for prediction, and one “why” question that required some analytical thinking,

What do the different people in the neighborhood think is beautiful?

What do you think is beautiful?

What in the story?

What in your life? It’s not always an object! Can you think of a sense or an experience?

How does [the girl] feel at the beginning when she sees the word on the door?

When she runs past the alley?

When she sees the woman who sleeps on the sidewalk?

How does she feel later, when she eats the sandwich?

When she holds the baby?



When she feels the stone?

When she washes off the word from her door?

Why do her feelings change?

What will Mama's "something beautiful" be?

The first four questions asked students to personally connect to the story, which is a common teaching strategy for encouraging student engagement and relation to characters. The next eight questions called on students to track the arc of the main character's feelings and their evolution. Three highlight the dire circumstances in the neighborhood and how living there might feel. Three point to the book's theme of finding positivity as resisting negative feelings. Two ask student to recognize the girl's feelings of empowerment from personally making change and point to the optimism in the face of challenge that the main character represents. The last is a simple prediction question, and most students got the answer right immediately. These questions were excellent for a literacy lesson in comprehension, making connections, character development, and prediction.

However, they were not critical questions or race, ethnicity, and inequity questions. A question about why only Black people lived in the neighborhood might have pointed out contemporary residential segregation. A question about why the neighborhood is both Black and poor could have helped students connect segregation and economic inequity. Asking students to think of something they find beautiful did not draw attention to the very different circumstances of life represented in the book, and in a certain way minimized the inequity that is a key message of the book. Lastly, mention of race was absent from the questions, and as a result, was absent from student discussions.

These questions limited the potential for discussion of racial inequity and intersectionality inherent in the story. Participants proposed questions that are familiar to early elementary educators because they are lessons in reading literature. This is what participants were familiar with. They were less familiar with critical-thinking style questions. I hoped and planned, as time went on, to acquaint them with critical questions and built their skills in their development and in guiding such critical conversations. Nevertheless, the complete omission of race and ethnicity-related questions also suggests avoidance of the topics. Participants, who had expressed discomfort around teaching these topic previously, manifest their reluctance in these avoidant questions.

*A Sweet Smell of Roses* follows two Black sisters who snuck away from home to join a civil rights march. On one page, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke to a crowd of both Black and White demonstrators. On another, counter protesters yelled angrily, and police stood stoically between the groups. At the end, the girls navigated their way home safely where their anxious mother lovingly embraced them. Questions we developed included,

What is a march?

Why do people march?

What does “clapping with your feet” mean (referencing a metaphor in the text)?

Why is Mama worried on this page?

These questions, unrelated to race, ethnicity, and equity, engaged students with the book, yet skirted the issues at its heart. When typing up these questions, I became concerned and so added some with more critical-thinking potential,

What does the author think about marching for equality?

Do you agree?

The girls marched for equality for African American people. What is so important to you that you would march for it? What would you change?

The first of my questions called for students to think outside the fictional frame of the story about authorial intent, an important skill for critiquing social messages. The later questions asked students to reflect on their personal beliefs and values. Luckily, the story was framed by other classroom teaching around the Civil Rights Movement in honor of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Day and Black History Month. Therefore, students were able to consider the Civil Rights Era in depth and produced some rich reflections beyond answers to our questions. Students also made connections to recent protest marches they and/or their parents had attended and discussed social justice issues more generally, and women's rights in particular.

Most questions used with *The Last Stop on Market Street* focused on the main character's feelings and experiences. The story followed CJ, a brown-skinned boy, and his grandmother as they took a weekly trip from church to a soup kitchen where they volunteered. It was raining, and the imagery was of trees drinking up the water like straws and the pattern made on CJ's shirt. On their journey, they take a bus filled with diverse and interesting riders. Economic need is a key feature of the story as well as generosity and, like in *Something Beautiful*, finding beauty in a downtrodden neighborhood. The development of CJ's shifting feelings about the trip are central to the story. Questions included,

What does "freckled CJ's shirt" mean?

Tell me what you're noticing about the people [on the bus].

What does that tell you about them, about who is in the story?

Why are CJ and Nana taking the bus not a car?

Is a car free or expensive?

What is a soup kitchen and why do people need them?

Have you ever given food to a food drive or soup kitchen?

What does that tell you about the neighborhood?

How is CJ feeling on the bus?

Why?

What does “feel sorry for himself” mean?

How does CJ feel when he listens to the music on the bus?

How does CJ feel when he gets to the soup kitchen?

He says, “I’m glad we came.” Why is he glad? What felt good?

The later six questions focused on CJ’s emotional development as he moved from feeling sorry for himself at having to go to the soup kitchen, to feeling glad he did. Nora in particular emphasized the experience of doing something good for others with her students. She reported students identifying with CJ and citing their own examples of being forced to do something that ultimately feels good; they described learning to read and playing with a younger sibling, among others. Nora’s students understood the somewhat sophisticated concept she was teaching, and they were able to make direct personal comparisons. This rich teaching and learning moment was relevant to the book, but unfortunately skirted the themes of the intervention.

Five of the questions used examined economic differences without tying in skin color of the characters or racial discrimination and inequity. In fact, the book itself supported that omission: CJ was presumably Black, yet there was no mention of that or of people of color generally. As such, the book was a poor choice given our focus. None of the questions we planned really called for critical thinking, either within or beyond the box of the story. With so many questions, the read-aloud itself became time consuming, allowing participants little time to

teach any one theme of the book with much depth. The participants, when speaking about their students' responses, indicated that they had little sense of the economic need of the characters or any connection between race and economic status. Although economic need is a difficult concept when students are generally well-off, this lack of comprehension was at least in part due to the dilute focus on race and socioeconomic status of the many questions.

**Extension activity development.** Activities we planned for following the read-alouds and discussions were ideally intended to extend students' understanding of the themes of the books and of race, ethnicity, and equity as well as to give a creative and visual means of expression to students who were less verbal. The selection of activities came to be another area of avoidance. Activities proposed by participants were generally unrelated to our focal topics, but were pleasant and tied to the illustrations or images in the books. When, in one case, I recommended a connection to our topics, it was not consistently implemented. In several cases, these activities were not helpful in fulfilling the intervention's purpose.

***Related extension activities.*** Extension activities that were directly tied to books or to themes in books supported student reflections and expression around race, ethnicity, and equity. In my research into critical literacy teaching, I had found two activities that seemed right for our work. One was perspective taking and giving voice to silent characters. In *A Sweet Smell of Roses*, students carefully reviewed the illustrations and added thoughts and words they imagined coming from the figures drawn, but whose perspective is not represented. This allowed students to see multiple perspectives on protest for civil rights and the conflict and struggle that existed. The students' responses from Nora and Anne's classes were insightful: marchers announcing that they deserved equal rights and citing Dr. King's messages; counter-protesters demanding that the marchers aren't as good as White people and don't deserve freedom; the police officers worried

about the safety of the children and uncertain about the marchers' demands for change. Anne and Nora, who conducted the activity, were impressed by the sophisticated thinking of their students, who seemed to enjoy the experience of taking others' perspective and getting "inside" the story to understand multiple perspectives of the time.

I also suggested an adaptation of a "learning wall" (Vasquez, 2004), which served as our culminating project. Each participant made a poster with cover images of each story we had read. Then they asked students a series of questions, developed by me but approved by the participants, about connections between the books and about themes I hoped students had been considering. The questions were as follows,

What do the books tell us about people with different skin color than yours?

Why do some people discriminate against people who are Black or Brown?

What can you do to be fair and kind to people who have different color skin than you do?

What can you do to help the world be more fair to people who are Black or Brown?

Why is being proud of your culture important?

By participants' reports, students seemed excited to reflect and consider connections between messages in the collection of books and to attempt to synthesize the message of all the books taken together. Students made many insightful comments during the exercise, as described in chapter five as "student awareness." Linking extension activities to themes and messages of the books helped fulfill the research mission and spurring student thinking around race, ethnicity, and equity. Outcomes of these activities not only demonstrated students were thinking about our topics, but also seemed to engage participants in a way simple book-talks did not.

I suspect that because the activities required less teacher-led discussion about race and ethnicity, and more student-led conversation, participants may have felt more comfortable with

exploration of the topics. Participants often questions introducing topics such as racism or contemporary discrimination through our work, feeling they were “negative” topics and students were beneficially colorblind. But participants were delighted when their students made statements such as, “everyone should play together,” or “some White people do care about Black people.” These comments not only were easy to emotionally digest because they were “positive,” but the participants themselves did not feel they had to explore, dig, or push to elicit the comments. Students readily shared connected observations for three likely reasons: the activity was structured for higher-level thinking about themes beyond one story, the questions directly and clearly addressed the topics, and the activity took place at the end of the intervention when students had already gained vocabulary and awareness of the topics. Participants comfort level and satisfaction with the student discussion that resulted also helped us all see the thinking and insight their students were capable of with the right scaffolding.

***Related, but not properly implemented extension activity.*** Art activities suggested by participants, and accepted by me as facilitator, were unrelated to the intervention’s mission or were implemented by participants without instructions to make the connection. An example came from the book *A Sweet Smell of Roses*, which features Black and White illustrations with single red items on each page. Anne suggested the following activity: Students would be instructed to rip Black paper and White paper and make an image out of the pieces, also using a single piece of red paper. After discussion about how to tie the activity to the themes of the book, I emailed the following instructions to participants,

Activity: Have kids rip up Black and White paper and glue together into ‘something beautiful.’ Add a piece of cut-out red paper to connect to the book [*A Sweet Smell of Roses*]. Talk about the connection—What do you wish for, like MLK, Jr.’s dream? Can

connect to question above, [What is so important to you that you would march for it? What would you change?].

In response to these directions, two participants, Anne and Laurel, instructed their students to make anything they thought was beautiful. Some resulting student work from Anne's class is represented below.

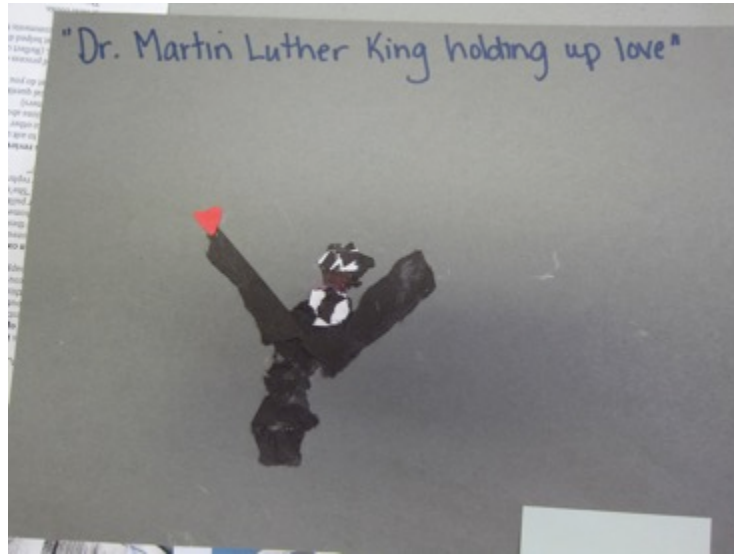


Figure 1. *Sweet Smell of Roses* extension activity: “A puppy,” and “An ice cream cone with sprinkles and a cherry.”

As is evident, the students who did not receive the instructions that the collage should relate to the text generally made unrelated images. In this sense, this was not an extension activity through art, but simply an art activity. Anne and Laurel bypassed this opportunity to gather students' impressions of the text and ideas about our topics.

However, some students independently made a statement on our themes. One of Anne's students spontaneously connected her art to the book. She was the sole student in the class to do so. Her collage, pictured here along with her dictated words, “Dr. Martin Luther King holding up love,” is a clear representation of an aspect of Dr. King's message.

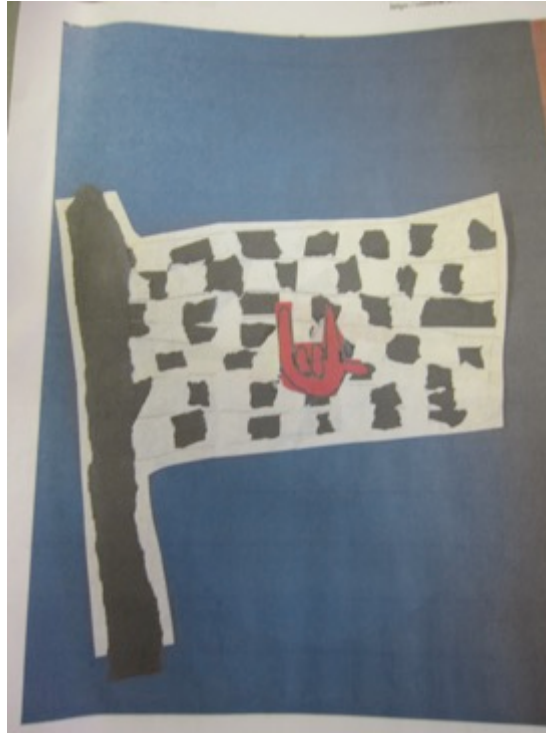




*Figure 2. A Sweet Smell of Roses extension activity:*

"Dr. Martin Luther King holding up love."

The illustrations of Dr. King in the book and the theme of marching for civil rights had clearly inspired her. The resulting artwork was a synthesis of what the student had learned about Dr. King and his teachings. One of Laurel's students also spontaneously responded to *A Sweet Smell of Roses*. This image showed a Black and White interpretation of the U.S. flag with "I love you" in sign language as a symbol in the center.



*Figure 3. A Sweet Smell of Roses extension activity.*

This rich symbolism suggested the student's desire for a loving, multiracial country. Whether this was the student's interpretation of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s message or if it was his own message is unclear in retrospect, but either explanation is equally sophisticated. These two images are examples of student thinking inspired by the text and its themes to represent their beliefs around racial difference and equity.

When participants did give students the instruction to make an image connected to the story, the results were visually interesting and relevant. For example, Margo discussed the meaning behind the Black, White, and red illustrations,

My kids noticed it right away. They said, "It's all Black and White and red." They said the red was love, and it was Black and White because it represented the people.... Saying that's why the illustrator did it that way. Then when I did it later, because I read the story in the morning, I connected it to the activity.

In response, her students created a variety of images and messages, from a White girl asking a Black girl to play, to an image of figures with the statement, “the world is better with everyone together.” One of Margo’s students depicted Black and White figures reaching toward each other across a red symbol. Margo reported the following at the subsequent study group meeting,

This is [student’s name]. He made a White person on the Black paper and a Black person on the White paper and there was a hand actually in the middle, but I think he then made it into a heart. But there is a hand underneath there.... He said something about this being the line, or no, the heart flag, the love flag! It was between the two of them coming together.



*Figure 4. A Sweet Smell of Roses extension activity.*

Margo’s student created a narrative of interracial compassion and solidarity that synthesized of several books we had read, while it also encapsulated the student’s own point of view on interracial relationships. The rich results of this activity reflect the effectiveness of Margo’s linking it to the text.

Nora, too, asked for images that tied into the themes of the book. While differing somewhat from Margo's, she indicated as much in her instructions,

I directed them to be abstract with the Black and White [paper pieces], and then use your scissors with the red, once you've made your background, to make a statement about something that feels like it is connected to the story, that could represent something you might want to march for or believe in.

Using the concept of marching for a cause as a connection to the book, she helped her students reflect on their own opinions and values. Her students made a range of abstract designs in Black and White, each with a red symbol representing their beliefs. According to them, the red pieces represented "freedom and love," "the world and love," and "the peace dove," among others.

While not directly tied to race and ethnicity, the images were thoughtful around Civil Rights Movement themes. The direct instructions seemed to greatly increase the likelihood of students expressing a concept around their wishes for the world, rather than making an image that was just pleasant or favorite object.

The last three student collages shown above were notable for their internalization and representation of anti-hate and anti-racism messages. Optimally, we could assume that these students had comprehended the historical racial inequity they were taught about, especially on Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Day and during Black History Month, and that they had responded with messages of resistance and optimism. Other students likely were processing related ideas, but without the instructions to make a connection through the project, they had less opportunity or motivation to express their thoughts. These and other student work samples provide evidence that, as an extension activity implemented with intention, this project supported student critical thinking and self-expression about our topics.

The group's reflection on this activity, the process behind it, its outcomes, and their roles, was minimal, unfortunately. When Anne and Laurel reflected on these pieces of insightful student commentary, they were delighted by the students' heartfelt and thoughtful responses, but did not express regret or even comment on their own decision to avoid directly instructing student to tie their images into equity and race. When summing up the project, Anne stated, "They really had fun. You know why? It is so kindergarten appropriate. It wasn't writing persuasive essays. You know? That just makes me crazy." Anne's assessment of the project was that it was a success because it was fun and therefore at a kindergarten student's "level." The comment implies that she praised the activity in part because it did not challenge students to think critically beyond their perceived "level." The lack of reflection may have been additional avoidance, as participants consciously or unconsciously resisted examination of their difficulty completing the planned activity.

After each participant had shared their students' work, I attempted to reflect on the gap between the assignments Anne and Laurel had given versus Nora and Margo, and on the resulting student work,

So, some of you connected *Sweet Smell of Roses* to the Black and White [art project] and some of you didn't. So, like, I'm wondering how that would play out if you did connect it to the book during the activity? And that would remind the less verbal and more visual learners to incorporate their ideas into the work, or not.

I asked these participants, without naming Anne and Laurel, to consider how they might have done the project differently and what the outcomes might have been. I hoped they would comment on why they hadn't followed the plan and what they thought about that in retrospect, having seen the others' student work. My question, however, was not very effective in spurring

self-reflection; when I did not get responses, I bowed to likely collective discomfort and moved on to discussion of other subjects. This was indicative of the difficulty of confronting our own issues with implementation of the curriculum in general, mine as well as theirs.

The avoidance of implementing this activity fully points to participants' difficulty engaging directly with themes of race, ethnicity, and inequity with young students. Participants appeared uncertain of when focusing on these topics was appropriate, even though they had cooperated in designing the activity. At times, they prioritized "having fun," which they felt was appropriate for the age. At other times, they expressed being surprised and impressed by insightful student work. Eager to do right by their students, participants felt their way forward through our work, talking about these "loaded" topics with caution. This fluctuation appeared consistently throughout our work together, and it was very confusing for me and possibly for the others as well. I did not know how to address this phenomenon, despite some attempts to nudge participants toward greater openness. Our confusion typically manifest in avoidant and/or "safe" curricular decisions, such as selecting unrelated questions and activities. In another form of avoidance, we kept a close focus on getting the planning done. By working deliberately and quickly on moving through the books, we had little time left for reflection on how our efforts were reflecting our mission or how we were feeling about the process. This problem-solving, hard-working orientation was effective for channeling and ignoring discomfort around emotional subjects, such as confronting racism.

***Unrelated extension activity.*** Some post-read-aloud activities were chosen simply for the pleasure they would bring to students. Participants agreed that after reading *Last Stop on Market Street*, in which the boy CJ closed his eyes to listen to guitar music and pictured beautiful colors, they would play quiet music and have their students paint any images that they see while

listening. While this assignment connected to some imagery in the book, it had no relationship to the subject, plot, or themes of the book, much less to race, ethnicity, and equity more generally. However, each of the participants responded to Anne's suggestion eagerly and seemed to not notice the irrelevancy. I felt obliged to go along and not spoil their enthusiasm, though uncomfortable with the choice. This book was read early in the intervention, and I believed that the phenomenon would not become a pattern. This was one of two activity suggestions that were disconnected from our goals.

Another extension activity, this one from late in the intervention, was selected for inappropriate reasons and in fact worsened our impact on students because of racial stereotyping. Along with reading the book *Thunder Boy, Jr.*, a story about a Indigenous American boy who does not like his name and makes up new ones, participants chose to ask students to reflect on the meaning and origin of their own names and then to design a new name for themselves in the style of some Indigenous names. The new names were to have at least two parts and be self-descriptive. Participants viewed the activity as fun for the students and as making a story-to-self connection. This naming game not only ignored the place of race, ethnicity, and identity in the story, it also stereotyped Indigenous people by neglecting actual facts around traditional naming. The activity was in fact worse than not social justice teaching; it utilized a racial stereotype to provide fun for others.

Our mistake was exposed as, essentially, mission overreach. Before her read-aloud, Laurel had thought about the some backlash a colleague had attracted earlier in the year for exploring the symbolism of Native American headdresses. Hoping to avoid backlash, she looked at resources online on teaching about Indigenous cultures. One article indicated that despite our

good intentions, our planned activity was offensive and represented cultural appropriation. At the subsequent meeting, Laurel quoted the article to us,

Laurel: This is from the Anti-Defamation League, and it actually says down here,

“Teachers are sometime interested in having them create their own Native American names. This trivializes Native American history ...

AH: Uh oh.

CS: Interesting.

HM: and culture and understanding.” So I was like, let me not open myself up to that one in this building.

[General nervous laughter.]

Laurel cited backlash fear as her reason for not engaging in the planned activity, and the laughter of the group communicated empathy and commonality around that fear. However, crossing a line into racist thinking and behavior was the greater fear for me and likely for the others as well.

This significant failure to self-educate about a culture other than our own demonstrated our racial and cultural ignorance. Unfortunately, Laurel did not share what she had learned with the group until the following week, after the activity had been implemented in three classrooms. We had attempted to implement teaching beyond our own cultural backgrounds, a hard task, without first learning about our subject.

Our casual confidence reflected the privilege of having no consequences attached to ignorance of another culture. This instance of cultural appropriation called into question our appropriateness as carriers of an anti-racist message. My disequilibrium, caused by believing myself to be firmly anti-racist while actually enacting racism, damaged my self-concept and upset me. But I thanked Laurel for her research and let the conversation move on to other



subjects. The idea of discomforting the others by pointing out the serious implications of our mistake was too daunting. I also felt inadequate to publicly reflecting on my own racism. I suspect this was true for the participants as well: Had Laurel experienced concern or hesitation around the naming activity during our planning, and not spoken up for fear of upsetting us? Our reluctance to confront our own and one another's racism likely stifled public and critical self-reflection and inhibited disagreement or divergent views. This self-silencing of race talk contributed to our inability to design a curriculum that was consistently anti-racist. The challenges of candid race talk represents one important danger of teaching about oppression from the position of the dominant cultural group.

**Missed Opportunities.** Participants' missed opportunities for rich anti-racist teaching fall into two categories. The first type emerged around the books *Thunder Boy, Jr.* and *The Name Jar*, books about Indigenous people and a Korean immigrant. Without much knowledge about these cultures to share, discussion missed the point of education about the groups and their experiences. The second type of missed opportunity occurred in classroom discussions when participants heard insightful student comments about race, ethnicity, and inequity and then let them pass by, instead of following up with additional questions. Participants thereby passed up Chances to explore our topics with their students.

**Missed opportunities in books.** My observation notes from the read-aloud of *Thunder Boy, Jr.* included little discussion of what it means to be Indigenous and unfortunate amounts of playing into stereotypes. Documented in my classroom observation of the read-aloud, Anne guided discussion around the book,

The next page has Thunder Boy, Jr. doing powwow dancing. Anne asks, "What kind of people have Powwow dancing?" A boy, White by appearance, says "North Americans."

An apparently White girl corrects him, “Native Americans.” The boy says, “I am Native American.” Anne acknowledges that Native Americans are part of his “ancestry.” She adds, “Native Americans have names that mean something about themselves. Later on we’ll come up with Native American names.” The students respond enthusiastically. One apparently White girl asks, “Please can you change my name?” and a second echoes her. ... [Anne] says, “What’s something you’re really good at?” She calls on some students for their self-naming ideas: “Lego Boy,” “Swim Man,” “Swims in Deep Water.” Anne has them “turn and talk” about name ideas. They talk eagerly with a partner or two. ... One student calls out (but I can’t see who it was), “There is a real Native American in our school! [Name of student in another class.].!”

Anne responds, “And [name of student in the class who self-identified earlier] is too, right [his name]?” She adds, “He has a special outfit to wear.” (This is the extent of the discussion of Native Americans and the point of the naming in the book. I can’t see the facial expression of the boy involved. He doesn’t say much about being Native American, or about anything else, but it is unclear if he is quiet generally, doesn’t know much to say, or doesn’t want to say much.)

Students learned the term “powwow,” that powwows are Native American, and that they includes dancing and “special outfits.” Then Anne presented as fact something that is misleading, that “Native Americans have names that mean something about themselves.” According to Indigenous authorities, traditional naming is typically connected to nature, is decided primarily by family or elders, and changes over time as personal identity evolves. A more accurate and nuanced understanding of naming could have been presented to students through the book itself. The story includes names from nature, a name passed down through

family, and change to his name made by elder family. (Thunder Boy, Jr.'s father changes his son's name to Lightning to represent his maturing identity.) This small sample of cultural information, some of it wrong, likely did little to inform students about Indigenous Nations.

A positive take-away was building students' awareness that Indigenous peoples are contemporary, not solely historical, and may be sitting next to you and are like you. This may go some way toward dispelling stereotypes and misconceptions. This message seemed almost an inadvertent side-effect, however; Anne herself historicized her students' identity. Anne, who had heard from the student's mother that they were Indigenous, acknowledged the student's self-identification with a comment that Native Americans are part of her student's "ancestry," which puts them in the past, when she might have acknowledged his comment that *he* was Native American, a contemporary identity. In this exchange there was a lack of awareness of or empathy toward the in-the-moment experience of the sole student aware of his Indigenous ancestry. The student's relative quiet during the discussion might have signaled lack of interest, lack of knowledge about his background, a generally quiet demeanor, or it might have been an indication of discomfort caused by the book and discussion. My note to myself at the conclusion of the observation, that he potentially "doesn't know much to say," shows my wondering about this. Asking the student questions about his ancestry in order to dispel stereotypes and promote understanding could have been a positive or negative experience for him, depending on his comfort level with the conversation so far and how much he had been taught at home. Anne's comments around what it means to be Native American instead marginalized the student by speaking for him about his identity, placing his identity in the historical past, and shutting down further exploration of his ideas around his identity. In general, the content of the conversation represented a missed opportunity because of the limited and sometimes inaccurate cultural

information shared by Anne, marginalization of the student who spoke up about his heritage, and for the perpetuation of stereotypes.

Margo's report of her read aloud of *Thunder Boy, Jr.* implied some similar difficulties. She, too, struggled with representation of Indigenous people and traditions, as well as with students' internalized stereotypes, despite her effort to present historical Indigenous figures as reference points for students. During the following meeting, she described students' discussion around the read-aloud, after I asked if she had offered them any cultural context for *Thunder Boy, Jr.*,

AH: I have one question for you. When I saw you do *The Name Jar*, you had that one girl who spoke up and said, "she looks Chinese," and then you said, "She's Korean," and explained a little bit about Korean culture, I mean, mostly food.

Margo: Yeah, we did talk about food. [laughs]

AH: Which is always a good cultural marker. [Laugh] And I'm wondering if you did that with *Thunder Boy*, too? Like when there was the powwow and stuff, did you say, "Oh, he's Native American, ...

Margo: Yes.

AH:... "and do you know that the powwow is a part of Native American culture?" And was that helpful?

Margo: No, I mean, I think they...[pause]

AH: They don't know what 'Native American' is?

Margo: Not really.

Nora: No.

Margo: I mean, we talked about how...it was more about the names. Like we talked about how they had heard of other famous Native Americans. We talked about Sitting Bull. I think someone mentioned Pocahontas.

AH: That's cool.

Margo: So they didn't really know anything about what they were doing. I can't remember, what was the part...? There may be a part of the book, was it the powwow that they explained a little?

AH: That he was dancing a certain dance....

Margo: Yeah, I can't remember if we talked about it. I think it was more about like the names and how it means different things.

AH: But I think that's a good idea, even if the kids don't say it, to say "have you heard of..."

Margo: I think they took that as he's playing pretend, or I don't know. Like it was part of...

AH: Oh, dressing up?

Margo: Yeah, I think so, and not as, um... they were like, "What is powwow dancing?"

Margo kept the focus on the issue of meaning in names, not addressing Indigenous cultures or cultural identity. In a later memo to myself, I addressed two problems that I found in Margo's report of the conversation,

Examples given by [Margo] or students only historical, not contemporary or cultural.

Problematic that she thinks they thought he was playing dress-up (as an "Indian"?) and she didn't bring that misconception up to them. Could have been a good chance to say,

"would you like it if someone was pretending to be you and acting silly?" Develop some empathy around cultural identity and appropriation.

First, the Indigenous people presented were famous to White audiences but were not widely representative of the true nature of Indigenous groups. Also, the figures mentioned were only historical, which may give students the common misconception that Indigenous people lived only in the past and are not contemporary. Second, Margo suspected students believed that Thunder Boy, Jr. was "playing pretend" when dressed in traditional powwow garb. This misunderstanding demonstrated a deeply held misconception of Indigenous people derived from popular media. Asking students to imagine the Indigenous perspective on children "dressing up" in stereotypical clothes and acting out an inauthentic role might have put their misconception in perspective. This missed opportunity with *Thunder Boy, Jr.* was an example of putting Native American traditions into the past and of narrowing cultural understanding to a very small feature (names).

While on the surface the book appeared silly, fun, and easy to teach, in fact doing it well was tricky. The book did not deeply explore the topic of traditional naming, and so it would require additional research to go beyond superficial understanding. Another challenge was non-Indigenous, three-fourths White teachers trying to teach about a people that is underrepresented in dominant culture; participants had few internalized cultural reference points to draw upon, but did have internalized stereotypes. A third difficulty was struggling against students' internalized stereotype that saw wearing Indigenous clothes and dancing as playing a game of "dress up." This misconception highlights children's sense of unreality when it comes to Indigenous people. The book itself was a poor choice for us. If our goal was to inform students around Indigenous

people, we did not have knowledge to fill in the book's gaps, and the story addressed an identity that we had no framework to understand.

The phenomenon of missed opportunities to give students accurate cultural context to books also encompassed a failure to teach about themes of cultural isolation in the book *The Name Jar*. This story featured a young Korean immigrant entering her new school in the United States. On the bus ride, children teased Un Hei for her unfamiliar name, and she feels social and cultural isolation. New friends in her class try to help by finding her a new, "American" name, which she ultimately turns down in favor of her own. Participants largely taught about the character's feelings of social discomfort, not her cultural isolation. This left students with the impression that Un Hei's predicament was being new, not to do with being from outside the dominant culture.

From our discussions during the meeting subsequent to the read-aloud, Margo's missed opportunity became apparent. Here, Margo quotes student comments reflecting their interpretation attributing Un Hei's distress to her name alone, "She wants to be like everyone else. She doesn't want to feel different. She doesn't want to be teased anymore. She's different because her name isn't like everyone else's name" (meeting seven, 4/4/18). Margo's report did reflect student awareness of pressure to conform, but did not show the connection that this was tied to Un Hei's experience as an immigrant and her cultural or racial identity. Margo added, "and one of the interesting things I noticed about their responses was really about how they focused on her name and how that was the focus and that's what made her different. Nothing about the way she looked or where she's from." At first, Margo seemed to attribute this student omission to students' ignorance or disinterest, rather than to her own teaching. Then her thinking shifted, and she indicated that she wished she'd focused more on race and cultural difference,

I mean it was a long book and I didn't get to a lot of the things that we maybe could have gotten to. I think it would be nice to go back. Like, I thought about maybe, like, looking at the idea of race. Like, well, she is from Korea, so not only is her name different but she does look different. ... And she [Un Hei] does also talk about in the book how it's the same and different. Like, [reading from the page] "it's the same rain but in a different place."

Margo suggested that she is could have done more to teach around race specifically, rather wait for students to bring it up, using Un Hei's physical appearance. She stated that she might also have drawn out students on the book's themes of similarity and difference between Korea and the United States and Un Hei's sense of dislocation using key illustrations and phrases.

Interestingly, when I observed Margo reading the book, I noticed her focus on comprehension of the character's feelings of embarrassment, then a subtle shift away from why her name is different than the others. My observation notes read,

Margo begins the book with a front cover prediction. "What do you notice about the girl?"

An apparently White girl responds, "She looks like a Chinese girl." Several others raise hands and describe the actions the character appears to be making. Margo says, "Go back to what [the first student] said. She's not Chinese, but she is Korean." A different White girl calls out, "Like gangnam style!"

The students are eating, but are still attentive to the book and one another speaking. (This is a routine for them, reading during snack.)

Margo reads with animation on the page where the main character is teased on the school bus. Students respond, "That's not nice!" and "They don't understand her." An African



American boy says that the kids on the bus, “are not listening. They don’t have good ears.” Margo asks students to “turn and talk” about the page, and she moves to a table to listen in. She asks, “Why are they making fun of her? What’s her name?” A White boy says, “She has a weird name and they can’t pronounce it. She has a hard name.”

Margo: “How is she feeling? How do you feel when you blush?”

Many hands go up. An African American girl answers, “Embarrassed.”

In the discussion, Margo focused on the character, Un Hei’s feelings and experience, even when students pointed directly to the name as “weird.” Margo drew on her students’ empathy around the experience of being teased, tying that to the character’s name being unfamiliar and difficult for the other students to pronounce. Margo’s students do empathize with Un Hei, quickly pointing out unkindness and lack of understanding.

Margo’s students clearly grasped the arch of Un Hei’s feelings in the story and the injustice of the teasing. They also noted that Un Hei’s name was “hard” and “weird” and that the teasing children “don’t understand her.” Margo’s students indicated that unfamiliar and difficult to pronounce names appear as strange. Why the name was hard--because it was from another culture and the sounds are unfamiliar--would have been important to explore with the class. This connection between the unfamiliarity and assumptions of strangeness is a crucial piece of understanding the roots of xenophobia and the enforced isolation of cultural “others” that the teasing on the bus represents. Margo later reported that she struggled to convey to her students the cultural difference component of the story, such as that the teasing based in cultural ignorance and possibly xenophobia. Un Hei felt isolated and encountered self-doubt not only because she was teased, but because of the huge cultural change she was undergoing and because her differences were being rejected. Margo and the other participants reported that this message

went over their students' heads. However, this was not a passive process, and represents choices that were made in how to teach the book.

Margo succeeded with building students' empathy, but struggled with how to convey key messages of the book about cultural difference and isolation. Despite pages in which Un Hei reflected on the cultural and personal meanings of her name, this opportunity for students to learn about cultural isolation, acceptance, and an immigrant experience was missed. Instead, student understanding was limited to the dynamics of interpersonal difference and unkindness. This surprised me, as Margo had reported her own personal experience feeling culturally isolated as a non-White immigrant child and feeling embarrassment about her name. My expectation was that she would identify with the character and would pass on a rich understanding of the book and of immigrant experiences to her students. However, we never discussed this commonality between Un Hei and Margo's experiences. I did not publicly connect Un Hei and Margo to avoid the act of spotlighting, or expecting Margo to represent and speak for all immigrant experiences rather than just her own. However, my avoidance did not change my unspoken, preconceived expectations based in Margo's immigrant, ethnic background. Also, not speaking added to our problem of silence around the issues we were intended to address.

Like Margo, Nora struggled with the message of cultural isolation in *The Name Jar*. At the next meeting, Nora reported her read-aloud results,

[A student said,] "She feels like she doesn't fit in." So when I probed to say, "Well, what does that mean if she doesn't fit in?" they said, "They're teasing her. They're being mean to her." It didn't go to, sort-of, "I'm from another ethnic group. I'm from another racial group." It more was about, "I'm new."

Here, Nora indicated that she understood the message of the book about cultural isolation, but felt she could not achieve student understanding of that. From the discussion, I did not gain a clear enough understanding to say why Nora felt she could not guide student discussion closer to the relevant message. When it occurred that students missed key aspects of texts, participants tended to attribute this to students' developmental limits in cognition and their limited awareness of difference. Also, because participants employed a rationale that teaching should be emergent when dealing with race and ethnicity, they tended to abdicate authority for guiding the direction of conversations to students. These factors accumulated to make teaching *The Name Jar* replete with missed opportunities. The teaching around this book also reflected the ongoing conflict between my hope for participants to teach more specifically and explicitly around themes of racial and ethnic identity and inequity and their avoidance, possibly based in their rationales around students' immaturity. Passing over insightful student comments that addressed our themes was a way in which participants also limited our potential impact.

***Missed opportunities in discussions.*** At many points during read-alouds, students voiced insightful ideas and critique connected to our topics. Participants sometimes seemed to gloss over student comments rather than make them a focus of the discussion, thereby expanding upon them and drawing out more student ideas. In three examples, students explain White bias toward people of color, point out racial difference amid general segregation, and describe a link between ancestry and naming. A last case described is an example of the opposite: a student addressed the intersection of class and race, and a participant used successful strategies to help the class expand on it. This last example demonstrates what can be done in terms of critical thinking in discussion with young students in the right circumstances.

The first example of a missed opportunity occurred during discussion of *Something Beautiful*, the story of a Black girl in a rundown, racial homogeneous neighborhood who looks to her neighbors to find small instances of beauty. Discussing graffiti on the main character's front door that said "die," Anne's students suggested various explanations for the word being there,

And then finally, one of the little girls, who is White, said, "There's just some people who don't like Brown people." And so then they all looked at each other like, "Oh!" like they were surprised. And I said, "You know what, I think you're right," and then we went on.

The student seemed to be suggesting that someone White wrote the word indicating racial hostility. Her interpretation of the text implied background knowledge about bias. Possibly this student had more to say from her experience, or perhaps other students might have had information or interpretations to add. The reactions of other students could also have been interesting to explore. Anne responded directly to the child, as if it were a one-on-one conversation, simply agreeing, which did not elicit more information or include others. Anne's words shut down the conversation. "And then we went on," indicated a firm close to the subject. Anne's immediate feelings about the student's comment were not clear from her report. I did not ask her reflect on the abrupt end to this line of discussion, so the data does not reveal whether Anne chose to leave the topic because of personal discomfort, from fear of what parents might say, or simply because she could not think of better response. Based on our ongoing push-pull over how deeply and explicitly to explore racial topics, my feeling is that Anne probably felt the conversation had gone deep enough, and that other students might not understand the comment anyway.

The second example occurred during my observation of Nora's reading of *Something Beautiful*. When Nora came to a page on which a teacher writes the word "beautiful" on the chalkboard and defines it, a student called out, "I saw a White person in that school!" The White classmate of the main character was the first depiction of a White person in the book about a contemporary segregated community. The spontaneous comment demonstrated that the student was noticing and thinking about race in the story, and that she had noted the homogeneity of the other characters. Presumably, she had recognized, or was quite close to recognizing that the community was a racially segregated one. In my observation notes from that day, I noted Nora's lack of response,

A girl, ethnicity/race unclear, says "I saw a White person in that school!" [Nora] keeps reading, still not following up on student comments. She appears to be trying to keep the conversation/the interruptions to a minimum.

Nora's decision to ignore the student's comment passed up a moment which might have been an entry point for more observations about the book: in addition to the community members being of one race, the neighborhood itself looks rundown and dangerous to the main character. Nora's motivations may have ranged from discomfort and avoidance to a more mundane concern for getting through the book on time. However, stopping to discuss the remark could have brought greater understanding of the book and the subject to more students.

After reading *Thunder Boy, Jr.*, participants reported struggling to make the connection between names and cultural identity. In a third example, one student had introduced a strong entry point for discussion with herself as the example. In a meeting, Anne described her class discussion of students' names,

I asked if anybody knew anybody with their name. We have a few unique names in our class, like we have a [student name]. She actually said, used the word ‘ancestor’ and told the class what an ancestor was, because she was named after her “ancestry,” she said, in Ireland.

An found the comment interesting and took note of it to share with us, but did not use it as a springboard into cross-cultural understanding. With a student locating her own naming within ancestry, heritage, and culture, Anne might have segued from Irish names to naming in Indigenous or Korean cultures. Drawing a parallel between her student being of Irish descent and carrying an Irish name and Thunder Boy, Jr.’s or Un Hei’s ancestry and names, could have helped Anne’s students comprehend the importance of cultural identity. Possibly Anne did not recognize the opportunity in the moment.

Missing these opportunities to dig deeper may have had multiple causes. Conversations can move quickly, and without much experience in guiding student-driven conversations, important moments to jump in and steer can pass by unrecognized. Another possibility is discomfort, that comments about our topics from students may have caused the participants to consciously or unconsciously resist finding out more about what students think. Beliefs about student awareness also likely played a role. Participants typically treated insightful comments as exceptional ideas of “advanced” individual children, which gave them a rationale for not expanding the comments to include the whole class. As I reviewed the data, I questioned whether participants were actively ignoring the comments, not understanding what the student meant, not taking the comments as serious analytical thinking (as opposed to repeating what they’d heard elsewhere), or were lacking the pedagogical skills to guide the discussion forward. Though it may not be a substantial correlation, race of the participant may have played a role in the degree

and quality of discomfort experienced in relation to student race talk, and therefore in the type of response they exhibited, avoidant or engaged. Exceptions to the phenomenon did occur where participants followed up thoughtfully on student ideas. One of the most interesting exceptions came from Margo.

Margo experienced a moment when one student's insight and knowledge surprised her. The story was *Gloria and Rosa Make Beautiful Music* about interracial friends who go to separate schools, one of which had money for musical instruments and the other that only had chorus. This story was especially challenging for students because it had only one illustration. The challenging teaching moment, quoted below, had potential to educate the group and bring the conversation to a new depth. During our meeting, Margo described the conversation with students, including one particularly insightful comment from a White girl,

They said, "the schools are different because one has instruments and money and the other doesn't. That's not fair." And then when I asked "why?" it was pretty interesting. One said, "Well, kids who have darker skin sometimes come from places that have less than others. It happens because they're from poor places." And I was like, whoa, okay! ... But yeah, so the kids were kind of like, you know, listening to her. I'm not sure if they fully got what she meant. And when I tried to connect it to *The Other Side*, she did say, another kid did say, a lot of them it was hard to connect it, but they did say it was similar because they were separated by color, the fence was separating the kids of different colors, and the kids of color are at different schools, and one has less and one has more. So they saw that connection, or one of them pointed it out.

Margo's asking "why" brought out a insightful response. Margo indicated that though the vocal student had a sophisticated explanation of economic and racial inequity and segregation, it was

difficult for the other students to follow her argument due to their lack of exposure to such ideas. Attempting to support the group's understanding of the issues, Margo made a connection to another recently read book that had similar themes, though about historical not contemporary segregation. The class was able to draw parallels between the two books, and seemingly better understood the concept of separate and unequal schools. These techniques of guiding critical conversation helped the students gain new insight into a complex topic by leveraging one student's words.

### **Conclusion**

Participants, especially the three White participants, demonstrated a degree of uncertainty and hesitance around how explicitly and specifically to teach about racial and ethnic inequity. Observing this during the course of the intervention, I chose key moments to push against their resistance and encourage participants to take risks. I attempted to balance gentle pushing with holding back and hoping participants would learn that these topics were right for their age group by hearing their students' insightful and critical responses. The outcome of this push and pull, more often than not, was participants limiting their teaching to within their existing comfort zone while avoiding the more challenging books, questions, activities, and student comments. "Challenging" in this case meant more directly dealing with racism, discrimination, and inequity.

In addition to avoidance and discomfort, there was a disconnect between our (mostly) White frame of reference and background knowledge and the material we attempted to teach. In other words, we did not know much about some of the cultures and issues we tried to teach about, and we were too entrenched in our positions of privilege to recognize or feel urgency to remediate this. While we did represent racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity in our book selection, we also presented students with stereotyped and inaccurate information. As McIntosh (1989)



described, White people often have the ability to overlook cultural information about other groups, as there is no real social penalty for them doing so. These struggles circumscribed the potential breadth and depth of the curriculum, which demonstrated just how difficult PD around race, ethnicity, and inequity can be.

In this analysis, I identified some obstacles to PD for teaching about race, ethnicity, and equity, including: participants' avoidance; our hesitant communication and reflection around racially-charged subjects among ourselves; our fear of incriminating ourselves or one another in racist behavior; and our narrow frame of reference from which to view cultures not our own. Striving for "comfortable" teaching was a symptom of discomfort around topics of race, ethnicity, and inequity. This tendency also led us to stay quiet when self-reflection was appropriate. A desire to "be nice" prevented us from challenging one another too directly on decisions and actions that either were avoidant or were somewhat racist. DiAngelo (2018) writes that a small degree of discomfort around topics of race or racism is sufficient for White people to experience the discomfort as intolerable or as an "attack." This White fragility was a significant factor in our collective avoidance of race talk among ourselves and especially around mutual critical feedback. In addition, out of overconfidence in our stance as progressives doing good work, in our perception of our identities as allies or "good" Whites (Thompson, 2003), we contributed to cultural appropriation, stereotyping, and historicization of Indigenous people. As Audrey Thompson writes of progressive White people and our belief in our own "goodness," "We are seduced by our certainty in our own abilities to think critically and get it right.... We trust profoundly in our ability...and it is this very trust that betrays us" (p. 19). Given this impression of ourselves, it is likely that Anne, Nora, Laurel, and I felt we would simply and

automatically make good choices about what literature to choose and how to teach it, whether this was realistic or not.

Nevertheless, we still achieved some rich learning experiences for students, which was evident from insights students shared through their comments and their visual art. Participants created classroom cultures where dialog around race, ethnicity, and equity was valued, lifting a taboo on race and ethnic differences. Teaching from a color-blind philosophy was reduced. When race as a topic is taboo or White people operate as though difference doesn't exist, we allow racism to continue unabated (Bonilla-Silva, 2006). Beliefs that young children are colorblind allow their teachers, parents, and caregivers to maintain a colorblind way of being in the home or classroom. For these four participants, moving away from colorblindness meant increasingly believing in their students' awareness of race and ethnicity, creating space for these topics to be talked about, and hopefully challenging their own assumptions about what topics around race should be actively taught. Participants gained experience with teaching critically about these topics, even perhaps despite some of their own discomfort, and ideally expanded their comfort zone around teaching the subjects. Student comments and artwork illustrated that, even though difficult, this kind of teaching can reach young students, informing them, inspiring social critique, and empowering them to demand fairness across groups. Overall, this limited curricular outcome still showed promise and could be improved upon in another iteration.

## Chapter Six

### **Invisible Boundaries: Eight Rationales for Avoidance**

This chapter will establish that participants felt discomfort with teaching about race, ethnicity, and especially inequity and that this discomfort led to avoidance of doing so through the employment of eight distinct but related rationales. In exploring this assertion, I will document each of the eight rationales for avoidance of teaching about racism and inequity expressed by participants, each of which became a significant barrier to full implementation of the anti-racism curriculum. This pattern emerged from analyzing data from participant discussions at study group meetings as well as student work samples and classroom observations, samples of which will be included below. The barrier of participants' own discomfort and the invisible boundaries created around so-called "loaded" topics such as racism and inequity is a key finding of this research.

It should be noted that while discomfort and rationalization were common to all four participants, the repeated use of multiple rationales was a characteristic of the three White participants, Anne, Nora, and Laurel. Margo, the one participant of color, stated throughout that she believed students to be aware of race, ethnicity, and inequity. She also cited fewer rationales, two involving students' parents: fear of parent backlash and hesitance to usurp parents' agency in teaching their children about these issues themselves. She most consistently referred to her fear of backlash. This difference is explored further in this chapter. Going forward, I referred to "participants" generally for all four, and "White participants" for Anne, Nora, and Laurel.

Participants expressed discomfort specifically around teaching anything "negative" (as described in chapter four) or content of the selected books that addressed inequitable circumstances for people of color. When they attempted to puzzle out their feelings, they arrived

at conclusions and reasoning that can be broken down into eight categories. These rationales became ideological obstacles to teaching about the group's topics. Curricular decisions such as what books to read to students and how or whether to ask probing questions in discussion came to be based to a degree on the opinions and fears expressed to the group in our meetings. (These curricular decisions are explored further as narrowing the curriculum in chapter six.)

Participants' discomfort spanned topics such as bias, discrimination, and racism. They all seemed comfortable with celebrating diversity when differences and commonalities were the primary message of the text or discussion. At points during the study group meetings, participants verbalized specific arguments for their pedagogical choices to reject a book, to avoid certain terms, or not to press students to think about racial/ethnic equity issues. At other moments, participants cited more vague feelings or instinctive reactions. The reasons they gave varied and together spanned a wide range of reasoning. In some cases evidence from one another's students contrasted with the teachers' beliefs about children, along with scholarly research I presented to participants about young children and bias. Occasionally, participants contradicted their previous statements about their beliefs and rationales around their own discomfort and their reasons for it.

### **The Eight Avoidance Rationales**

The phenomenon of White participants drawing on so many different rationales to explain their feelings and decisions to avoid certain content in itself pointed to discomfort with the general topic of inequity, rather than simply with one book or one term. This multitude of rationales potentially demonstrated an unconscious search for justification of their avoidance, and perhaps a denial of the likely discomfort of having their White privilege challenged by confronting contemporary racism. By examining the data, each rationale expressed by

participants will be explored for its relevance to participants' avoidant behavior in designing the classroom read-alouds, discussions, and extension activities. The following table 1 condenses the various rationale usage of each participant.

Table 1								
<i>Participants' Avoidance Rationales</i>								
<u>participant</u>	<u>Terms avoidance</u>	<u>Parent fear</u>	<u>Student misunderstanding</u>	<u>Parent agency</u>	<u>Students unaware</u>	<u>Beneficial naiveté</u>	<u>Emergent topics</u>	<u>Instilling bias</u>
Anne	X	X		X	X	X	X	
Nora	X	X	X		X	X	X	X
Margo	X	X		X			X	
Laurel		X			X	X	X	X

**Avoidance rationale one: Inappropriate terminology.** Certain terms around race created discomfort when participants contemplated sharing them with students. I suggested reading students the nonfiction book *The Skin I'm In: A First Look at Racism*. Based on use of the terms "racist" and "racism" in the book, these terms were discussed at length as to their appropriateness for kindergarten audiences. "Homosexual" and "lesbian" were brought up as comparisons to the previous terms as equally inappropriate. Some participants chose not to use "Black" or "White" to describe racial categorizations and preferred instead to use and to teach children to say "peach" and "brown." In the following excerpt, the three participants present at that meeting responded to use of the terms in the book immediately without having opened or read it,

AH: This one is good and as I said uses the word 'racism' and says ... "anyone can be a racist." ...

Anne: I probably wouldn't say that line when reading it.

Margo: Yeah me neither.

Nora: Yeah, I don't know about that.

Anne: It's okay to edit while you're reading? [laughter, agreement]

AH: We have to talk about that. ...

Anne: So if we can leave that line out then maybe, maybe.

Participants' quick response seemed almost intuitive and visceral, as if a invisible boundary had been violated. At the following meeting, we discussed the book at greater length and opposition remained strong, especially to the use of the terms "racist" and "racism" and their appropriateness for kindergarteners. Anne suggested that she was already teaching about racism, but without using the term. In the excerpt below from our third meeting, Anne appeared to imply that not using the term was almost coincidental or unintentional,

Anne: I don't know. But I've definitely talked about it. I've talked about it since the first year I was teaching. But I don't think "racism," that word just never came up.

Margo: I guess cause it's a loaded word.

Margo appeared to get to the heart of why some teachers might teach about racial discrimination but not call it racism: it is a "loaded" word. Margo's use of "loaded" suggested a deep background context that was complex and potentially upsetting, therefore had potential for explosive reactions when used. Margo pointed out that this dynamic is probably why Anne never used the term: fear of upset. Racism is especially tricky for White people to talk about because of the tendency to equate being "racist" with immoral behavior and character (DiAngelo, 2018). Fear of being labeled racist or of imposing the label and attracting White rage inhibits discussion of racism, and therefore fear limits the ability to understand the term's real meaning and

implications. Participants' quick response to the term "racist," before reading the book, remained a central objection and ultimately the book was rejected for use based several rationales.

Anne's statement also begs the question, why didn't she teach the name of the phenomenon she was teaching about? If the rationale is simply that "racist" is too complex a word for young children, then Anne is not alone in resisting teaching young children "big words." Many teachers avoid teaching complex ideas to young children, feeling that they are not cognitively able to comprehend them. Young children, on the other hand, acquire new vocabulary at a rapid rate. In the following excerpt from the third meeting, Anne and Nora demonstrate the point of view that complex terms are too difficult for their students,

Anne: It's not that I think they're never going to hear that word, I just don't know if I have to be the one introducing that word, in kindergarten.

Nora: Exactly.

Anne: What it is is coming out in conversation, but the word...

Nora: And then do you use the word 'lesbian' do you use the word 'homosexual'? Are we using those words with our five year olds?

Nora attempted to generalize and justify their conclusion, implying that students are also too young to know terminology for gay people. But by choosing other words for describing groups of people, Nora inadvertently shows that "racist" is in a group of words that make adults uncomfortable, most likely because of biases against the groups. These words are only controversial (to adults) because of bias. It seems that it is not simply that children are too young, but actually the power that "racist" holds for adults that the participants seem to fear.

This resistance turned out to be powerful within our study group, but not universal among educators. Anne sought opinions on the issue from outside our study group by offering to bring the book to be reviewed by the social justice educators group of which she was a member. The responses she received at the meeting of this group, which took place in the evening after our third meeting, changed her stance to toward use of the term “racist” with students, but not her opposition to the book. In the following email from Anne to the other participants and to me after her meeting, she described the feedback she had received on the book and on using “racist,”

One teacher from the middle school said that she finds nothing wrong with the word RACIST. She compared it to using the word FEMINIST - as it is just a word to describe a certain type of person. They truly made it make so much sense. ... Their thoughts are that introducing the word in kindergarten is not the problem but the way it is defined and described in this book was poorly done. Perhaps that is what was giving us such hesitation.... Whatever it is that is making us uncomfortable might not be the word but actually how the book is explaining it.

Anne told us how her perspective shifted on the use of the term “racist” based on another teacher’s comparison to the word “feminist.” The other teacher’s definition--essentially a group of individuals with a certain set of views--supported the vision of racism as based in the individual and implicitly upholds the good person/bad person binary.

Anne went on to suggest that the definition of racism that was operating in the book may be the source of her discomfort. In the book, racist is defined as the following: “Some believe that people from their race are worth more and should be treated better than people from other races. A person who thinks and acts this way is called a racist.” Oddly, the interpretation of racism that is supported by the definition found in the book itself is not inherently any different



from the definition described by the teacher who reassured Anne. Both definitions situate racism within individual “bad actors,” and both definitions allow individuals who see themselves as non-racist to avoid feeling complicit in racism by not acknowledging racism as a social structure that benefits all White people. Anne’s shift from objecting to using the term “racist” to objecting to the characterization of racism in the book appeared an empty rationale because of this contradiction: the book used the same logic as Anne found reassuring when it came from the other teacher.

It seemed likely that Anne’s increased comfort with using the term “racist” did not come from how the word was defined, but from having the view that it was acceptable validated by other individuals outside our group. Her discomfort had as one source what others would think about her decisions to include or reject the book. For Anne, this shift from resistance to the term toward resistance to the definition allowed her to feel more comfortable with her own reactions to the topic of racism without having to take any risks in her teaching. According to her report, Anne did not subsequently chose not to use the terms racist or racism with her students at any time throughout the intervention despite claiming increased comfort with the prospect of doing so. When asked about her discomfort in her exit interview, Anne indicated that she was comfortable with the work she had done through the intervention,

AH: What bothered you about the teaching you took part in to this project?

Anne: Really nothing other than that one book that I didn't like and I think it was just... it wasn't talking about racism [that bothered her]. I don't think there's anything wrong with that. I think it was just that particular book. Other than that, there was nothing. I really loved it. I'm glad I was a part of it. Yes. So really nothing.

Without self-doubt, Anne appears to feel satisfied with the results of our work, even around the book in question and having avoided teaching the word “racism” when teaching about racial inequity. Comments from Nora and Laurel likewise pointed to their relief at the outcome of not teaching the book to their students. Having a rationale for their avoidance of teaching about racism--that the book was poorly written, not that they avoided the topic--was perhaps a good psychic fit for their self-image, allowing them to still believe in their anti-racist stance and ignore their discomfort. The omission of this book from the curriculum preserved participants’ comfort, but it denied students a conceptual and verbal tool to understanding and resist bias and discrimination. Implementing this book could have offered students the “powerful discursive practices” that enable them “to participate in the world differently” (V. Vasquez, personal correspondence, March 12, 2019).

Other accepted terms around race and ethnicity were also avoided by participants. Some participants avoided use of the racial signifiers “Black” and “White” in the classroom and at times with the study group. While throughout Anne’s introductory interview, when talking just to me, she referred to people as Black or White or Asian, once we were in the group of participants and discussing children she instead began using the words “peach” and “brown” and once “beige” to indicate racial or ethnic groups. Other participants often did the same, and this word substitution is not uncommon among early childhood teachers. During our first meeting, Anne reflected with humor on her son, many years ago when he was young, coming home from school calling White people “apricot,” which showed that his teacher had been doing the same word substitution years before our intervention took place. Anne’s word choices were representative of participants’ avoidance of terms adults might use, this time by replacing the

language with alternate terms that are color descriptive, and therefore more physically accurate.

In our second meeting, Anne explained,

Anne: And I think they're fine identifying that, like "you're brown and you're peach," and nobody's White. Even one of them said, "Nobody's White."

Nora: Right.

Anne fairly consistently stuck with using "peach" and "brown" throughout the intervention.

Other participants alternated language, though appeared to prefer "peach" and "brown" when talking about speaking to children. I, too, occasionally inadvertently adopted this language when referring to students as "brown-skinned" or at one point asking, "What skin color is he?"

"Nobody's White," the student comment which Anne repeated, was a matter-of-fact statement.

From an adult, this could be interpreted as a kind of refusal to accept racial labeling in favor of terms more descriptive and supposedly less categorizing. The word substitution could be viewed as an attempt to rewrite terms designed for designating a racial and racist hierarchy in society.

This attempt was complicated, however, by two factors: teachers are unlikely to use their alternate descriptors with adults, thereby undermining their desire at undoing racist language; secondly, children are likely to be confused as they age through the grades and other adults use the more common terms "Black" and "White." The "peach and brown" alternate language also signaled a willingness to adapt adult language to children's so-called developmental level, stemming from a belief that they are too young for adult terminology and may become confused because they are more literal. This perspective on children as too undeveloped, and teachers' willingness to obfuscate or substitute euphemisms paralleled participants' desire to withhold the term "racist" as too mature or complex for them.

This avoidance of terms was significant because of the function of the terminology in empowering critical thinking and action for social change. “Racist” encapsulates a phenomenon that is foundational in our social structures, but often to Whites is ignored or rendered invisible. For young children with limited experience, this is especially so. Without being taught about racism, students cannot mobilize their thoughts around opposing it in their intentions, words, or actions. The significance of knowing the name of the phenomenon is the power to identify the phenomenon--racist behavior or structures--when it is seen and to name it and communicate it succinctly. In other words, students taught the term “racist” would be able to call out racism when they thought they encountered it. The word would give them power as change agents. What particularly were the participants afraid of in empowering students this way? Going forward through the data, more rationales for the invisible boundary around the term “racist” began to emerge.

**Avoidance rationale two: Fear of parental backlash.** Another root of avoidance was fear of parent and community upset and backlash should a student use the term “racist” beyond discussion of a book, especially at home. White fear of being labeled “racist” is so strong that little else can damage a relationship or trigger rage like that word. Anne, Nora, and Laurel likely felt uncomfortable around this word, as well as anticipating White parents’ discomfort hearing it. When “racist” triggers a defensive reaction and resulting anger, White rage would likely be turned against teachers who taught the word, rather than the child who spoke it. If White rage against teachers had occurred, it could have ultimately threatened participants’ careers, had they not had the backing and support of the school district administration. The district parent community had recently demonstrated its power to disrupt careers in the district through outcry over racially insensitive incidents in the elementary schools that ended in dismissal of a

substitute teacher and curricular reorganization. While Anne and Laurel had been teaching in their schools for many years and Margo for several, Nora was new in her first year in the district. Referring to the decision not to teach *The Skin I'm In*, Nora said during her exit interview, "My first year here, I'm trying to sort of feel out like, how do parents feel about things? How does administration feel about that? And you know, I don't really want to make gigantic blasting waves in the beginning. So no tsunamis in the first year." Nora made a convincing argument for keeping her job. Concerned despite her tenure, Anne compared parents' possible reaction to *The Skin I'm In* with other books that describe inequity without using the term "racist." As Anne explained in our third session,

Cause if they go home and talk about these [indicating the other books], great, they're talking about, there's a conversation. But they never used the word "racism" in either of these books. And now it's blatantly right here, 'that's called racism'! Or, like you said, "racist people make it hard for us to live together peacefully." It is, it's a loaded word.

Anne stated that she welcomed conversation about racial or ethnic inequity at students' homes, but without the term. The word being "loaded" clearly indicated substantial social and emotional background for adults, not for children who haven't heard it before; the term is "loaded" only for the adults hearing it. The implication was that strong and/or emotional reactions may come from parents toward the teacher who introduced the term.

Fear of parents' reactions was implicit in Anne's statement, and Laurel expressed similar concerns at her introductory interview. Here, she referred to social justice themed books in general,

I, I will say, I unfortunately hesitate because I'm still unclear, do I need to let the parents know? I'm more worried about the parent factor. I'm more comfortable with whatever I

think the students need to learn about and be introduced to. But I probably have stayed away from those books because of parent, possible parent discomfort. And I guess I've never asked, to be like, "Well, this is what I'm reading?"

Laurel had not sought parents' approval for the books she taught, but given her intention to join the study group and our material, she considered it before even attending a meeting. As she contemplated having to check with parents before implementing what she felt would be valuable student learning, she indicated a lack of authority and autonomy when it came to race and ethnicity. Fear of parents' reactions withdrew authority from teachers despite their commitment to student learning around racial and ethnic equity.

Participants also provided evidence of specifically why they were afraid. At one study group meeting, Anne and Margo vividly drew one possible outcome of teaching the terms, public outrage.

Anne: Definitely. I can't have kids going home using the word "racist" and...

Nora: Yeah, that's a loaded word. ...

Anne: Agreed.... That's what I was just going to say! It's a loaded word, and I think it's gonna come back [unfinished sentence]. You know "[town name] Online" [a community online forum]. Well, now it's just Facebook, but it's gonna cause such a like [pause] storm.

Margo: I can see it being all over there [Facebook community page], like: "those teachers who are talking about racism! My kid came home and told me about the racists!" Ugh.

Yeah, it's a little, I don't know, especially since we haven't sent the parent letter home, I feel like if this came up all of the sudden and their kids kept coming home, cause I have a

couple kids who apparently tell their parents everything, or other kids who are like...I don't know.

A storm of angry reaction on social media was a plausible, even likely outcome in participants' minds. One can imagine possible next steps of parent outrage: letters to local newspapers, lobbying of the principal and superintendent to have the teacher fired, even threatening messages and phone calls. Even if a teacher did see the potential for empowerment of students through learning the term "racist," the risk of backlash would still be a considerable obstacle.

Fear of parent backlash was not only centered around the terms we discussed, but was also discussed around holidays. In this excerpt from our first meeting, participants described the root causes of local elementary schools banning discussion of the history of Thanksgiving, which was the case at Susan's school. Susan reported that teachers were permitted only to discuss the concept of "community," and not the background of the holiday. She lamented the loss of her class play about the holiday<sup>3</sup>, and attributed the change to fear of parents,

AH: So the fears of administration, right? That's what we're talking about.

Susan: Well, and are the administrators afraid of the parents? That's who's... like, I'm afraid to get in trouble, and then [her principal] is probably afraid that the parents are going to come to him.

Anne: That's totally...

Susan: You know? Everybody's afraid. Everybody's afraid of everybody.

Margo: Well nobody wants to get sued. No one wants to end up in the news.

Anne: Yes!

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<sup>3</sup> According to Susan, the play followed the alphabet with examples of Thanksgiving themes, such as "A is for apple pie," "N is for Native American, and "P is for Pilgrim." As such, the historical content was at a minimum, and she felt it was politically neutral.

Margo's fear was not invented. A national news item in the year previous to the intervention featured a local elementary school and insensitive teaching around race. The media attention and significant local upset caused a minor staff shake up. At one meeting, Margo suggested a proactive approach to the concern: a letter home.

The four participants saw informing parents as a potential preventative measure, and we agreed to send an email that was somewhat of a disclaimer. Margo considered this step a valuable form of communication between home and the classroom and a way to potentially open conversations between students and parents, as well as a an bulwark against backlash. The letter's contents reveal the significance of fear of parents as a barrier and indicate what participants were comfortable with parents knowing about our work.

Dear parents,

I am writing to let you know about a very exciting project that your child's teacher has volunteered to take part in.

Background: I am a doctoral student at Rutgers Graduate School of Education studying how young students learn about race, ethnicity, and fairness through children's books.

My research is with teachers, developing approaches to using picture books to get students thinking. The teachers in my working group and I hope to empower children to speak, ask questions, and become inclusive and fair-minded around diversity and difference, as well as to take pride in their race and ethnicity and the diversity of their friends.

The project involves: your child listening to and talking about great books with themes of kindness, racial and ethnic diversity, inclusion, fairness to all, and how to stand up for yourself and one another. Only your child's teacher will be conducting the lessons.



The project will NOT involve: any photos, audio, or video recording or documenting of any identifying information of students. This project has been approved by the district administration and your principal.

When you ask your child about books they have heard at school, it is helpful to remember:

- Children don't always recall all the details right. Listen carefully for the bigger ideas they are taking away, like inclusion.
- If you are confused or concerned about your child's report of a book, please email me to ask the title, and read the book at the library so you can hold a conversation with your child about it.
- You are your child's most important teacher: what you tell them about these subjects really matters to them. It doesn't hurt to think about what you want to ask or tell them in advance.

With the collaboration of amazing teachers, I fully expect your children to have a quality, constructive experience.

Thanks for taking the time to read this. A book list of titles we have read so far also follows.

In partnership,

Amanda Hamlin

[Amanda.hamlin@gse.rutgers.edu](mailto:Amanda.hamlin@gse.rutgers.edu)

*All the Colors We Are*, Kissinger

*Two Eyes, a Nose, and a Mouth*, Intrater

*The Other Side*, Woodson

*Yo! Yes!* Raschka

*Sweet Smell of Roses*, Johnson

The letter was notable for what the participants and I chose to omit: mention of racism and inequity. While we didn't specifically discuss and plan to leave out words that the participants (and potentially parents) found controversial, this absence reflected parent fear in all of us, myself included. I believed in the potential for public outrage as much as the participants, and though the consequences for me would not have ended my career, I did not want to be responsible for ending theirs' or for having to start my degree research over in another site at another time. I omitted the key terms in an effort to avoid upset and confrontation with parents when my self-interest aligned with that of participants.

Similar motivations were revealed in my comments when acknowledging participants' rejection of *The Skin I'm In*: a desire to avoid conflict with them by showing I understood their concerns, to protect their jobs, and to keep my research subjects. In meeting four, I explained my position,

AH: Yeah, and I mean, I've looked on all the multicultural book lists that I can find and the databases and I haven't found books that use those words. I think that a lot of people are pretty freaked out by using those words cause of kids going home and saying,

"Mommy, am I a racist?" or "Are you a racist?" Anyway, we can skip that book, totally.

It's fine with me. Is that the consensus?

Anne: Yeah, I think so.

Fear of backlash persisted as the overriding sentiment of participants--and sometimes of mine as facilitator--in the discussion of the parent letter, of *The Skin I'm In*, and of the use of the terms "racist" and "racism" with students. In speaking during our first meeting of the elimination of

holiday observance, participants summed up their feelings and beliefs about parents' impact on their teaching,

Nora: There are lots of layers, because it's your career, it's the kids, it's the parents.

Anne: I think you're right about the parents, too. The administrators are afraid of the parents, but...

Susan: Yes! Because the parents are running the district right now.

Anne: A hundred percent.

Susan: So they are afraid. I'm afraid of them.

Given the very real threat to teachers' livelihoods, fear of parent backlash may have been the most impactful of the eight rationales given by participants in narrowing the curriculum through avoidance. One possible circumstance that participants thought of with particular dread was that students might learn the term "racist" and misuse it at home by calling someone a racist, triggering their parents' anger at teachers.

**Avoidance rationale three: Fear of students' misunderstandings.** Participants expressed fear of students knowing the term because they might have used it inaccurately, potentially misconstruing the message of participants' teaching due to their immaturity. The group seemed unified in the belief that their students could be easily confused when it came to racism. The feared consequence of this misunderstanding would be students incorrectly applying the term to peers or family and inspiring angry backlash at the teacher. In this excerpt Nora explained that she believed kindergarten-age specifically was problematic for teaching about racism, as opposed to older or younger students. Kindergarten was a problematic in-between age, she felt, during which students couldn't fully comprehend such terms. Because of this, she felt

they might apply the terms in the wrong context. She anticipated problematic communications with one child's parent as a result should she add "racist" to his vocabulary,

AH: I will tell you, I taught this yesterday to my pre-k, my three and four year olds. And they totally got it. It was all an issue of what's fair and what's not.

Nora: I could see that too. I think maybe the difference might be then you add another year or two to preschoolers and you have children who are a little more sophisticated in what they are understanding and yet not sophisticated enough to deal with it. And then they bring it in a positive way, they bring home this information and it can turn into something big. I'm thinking particularly of a student I have who's really struggling with his ability to interface with his peers. And he's constantly feeling persecuted.

Margo: So he might say like everyone's a racist?

Nora: Yeah, I could see him really turning this into, because already his mom sends me emails, and the subject line is, her son's name, "being bullied by," and then another child's name. And it's a dynamic with his mom where he's getting...

AH: What skin color is he?

Nora: Well, interestingly, he is Asian American. [...]. That seems to be the way that he's getting attention, by coming home and telling all kinds of ...

Anne: So that word might come out like, "he's a racist because ...!" Yeah.

Nora believed that the student would mistake his social situation for racism through an immaturity that was particular to ages five to six. The argument of kindergarten being both too old and too young for the term "racist" appears a thin veil over fear of backlash. Nora's fear of students misapplying "racist" was rooted in fear of parents' fragility and of potential backlash. She states that this child, who is Asian American, feels "persecuted," hinting at her sense of his

oversensitivity but also of a racial stereotype. In the excerpt below, sent via email subsequent to our third meeting, she explained precisely her thinking around this rationale for not teaching the book *The Skin I'm In* and the term “racist,”

I think I'm worried that my impressionable kindergarteners will immediately think their peers are racists, others in the school are racists, etc. They will conflate other kinds of uncomfortable social interactions with racism. While chatting about it at home, we were thinking that preschool might work and older kids might work with the text but that Kindergarteners are in that funny in between stage where they are prone to pick up ideas and wrangle them unsuccessfully. I'm thinking back to the first round of books where several of my kids were adamant that they are from China. Benign, but emblematic of the tendency to misconstrue. I think I'm a little worried in particular this year as I have a mom that is already convinced that her child is being bullied in school... I am imagining that a claim of racism brought home by her son would put her over the edge.

While this situation was an example of Nora's lack of faith in students' ability to comprehend and apply a complex term, it raised other questions. Nora feared that misapplication of “racist” might interact with a parent's existing tendency to overreact, itself a stereotype of people of color around issues of race. This statement echoes a common White trope that people of color are oversensitive and “see racism everywhere,” even in non-discriminatory interactions. While the dynamic Nora was observing with the child was plausible in that some children (like some adults) are especially sensitive to slights, the attribution of feelings of persecution to a family of color is problematic. The net effect of Nora's argument and avoidance was denying the class of a tool for social critique. Her lack of awareness and concern about this denial is a symptom of White privilege.

**Rationale four: Fear of usurping parents' role and agency.** The inverse sentiment from fear of parental backlash was also at play in participants' rationales against teaching about inequity and racism: respect for and protection of parents' potential role in this kind of teaching at home. Participants anticipated that parents not want teachers to open conversations about these matters with their children first and without them. Participants believed that parents would prefer to be the ones initiating and determining the content of such conversation. This belief was based in the supposition that this was actually happening in students' homes. According to evidence described by participants from student comments, some parents might have been talking about race, but the majority were not: vocal students were described as exceptionally verbal on the topics, which was attributed to repeating what they'd heard at home, while the majority were described as completely unaware.

Margo, while indicating that she felt her students were developmentally competent to consider these topics through children's literature, stated her concerns. Taking parents' point of view based in her own parenting experience during meeting three, Margo wondered how she would feel about hearing the term "racist" from her own children before she had taught it to them,

Margo: I mean, I could see reading it to my kindergarteners. I just, I just, I am uncomfortable with what, like, if ...

Anne: The repercussions.

Margo: Of what parents don't know first, because I'm not even sure how I would feel as a kindergarten parent if my kindergartener came home and ...

Nora: I'd be like, what?

Though she didn't finish her thought, Margo briefly indicated her consideration of parents' authority to teach their children important concepts. It was Margo who, early in the study group process, asked to have the letter to send home to parents. Her stated goal was to inform and initiate communication in case parents should have concerns. She requested that it also state district authorization of the project to ward off potential backlash. By asking for the letter, Margo revealed her emphasis on communication around parents' role as their children's primary teachers in topics around race, ethnicity, and equity. In fact, the intervention came to completion without participants receiving any parent feedback, positive, negative, or questioning. During her exit interview, Margo reflected on the source of her discomfort with teaching the term "racist."

I think, I guess also in the context of that book [*The Skin I'm In*] as well, and just how it seemed [pause], and of course in some ways it is, it is a negative word and, or it talks about [unintelligible] things. But yeah, I felt, I felt uncomfortable, um, having that conversation or being the first one to say it to them without parents, or [without] talking about it to parents first, and like what our, um, aim was, or our direction.

Here, Margo described "racist" as a "negative" word rather than a purely descriptive term. In describing this word as such, she seemed to be referring to the emotional content of teaching a term--negative or unpleasant feelings. Racism is not a happy topic. Other participants used "negative" as well in this sense, and it seemed to call into question the suitability of unpleasant topics for young children in general. As described in the previous chapter, Margo also expressed her belief in that interview that communication and dialog with families and the community was essential for progress around interracial understanding and equity. Margo's statements suggest that her parent fear was mixed with her desire for parents' to take the lead role in teaching their children about racism and inequity in a collaborative relationship between school and home.

Anne, too, cited her perspective as a parent in justifying not teaching “racist.” Here, during meeting three, she paints a picture of how she might feel in parents’ position, should participants teach “racist,”

Like you said, it might not be happening at home, but I’d rather have been the one to have told my son, if it was kindergarten, what a racist was, than him coming home with questions or something like...and then being confused, because knowing my own boys would never have asked about it at school. They might have heard it, or heard something and not the whole truth, or misconstrued it, and then come home to me where to me they’d ask questions. They’d be like, so is this person a racist? Or, well, “because I heard this person talk this way. Does that mean he’s a racist?” And then I could say, “Yeah, he is a racist,” or you know. Something like that, you know. But that would be again coming from me to my sons.

The rationale of protecting parents’ agency in teaching about racism that Anne expressed was genuine, and potentially beneficial, had participants believed parents were teaching their children about racism. However, participants demonstrated awareness that not all parents take on such teaching, and in fact some would find it intrusive, inappropriate, or offensive. In meeting three, we debated the idea,

Nora: Someone that wasn’t me... I guess maybe that’s the part that I’m wondering about because I’m getting the sense that my kids are not getting this or having this at home.

Anne: They probably have never heard this stuff... I don’t think, this word, they’ve heard.



AH: But is them not having this conversation at home a reason not to do it, or *to* do it?

[spoken emphasis] [pause] Cause lots of people aren't doing lots of things at home that

they come to school for [and] that we want them to learn. (meeting three, 1/17/18)

Likelihood of parental silence around these topics did not, however, add to participants' sense of urgency in our mission, as I was hoping it would when I made my point above. Participants made assumptions about parental responses based on their own parenting, but had little actual knowledge of parents and families to draw on for their decision making. Even as participants appreciated and respected parents' primary role in such teaching, the argument mostly served to avoid teaching the term and the book *The Skin I'm In*, thereby insulating participants from backlash. Fortunately, no parent backlash occurred. As one of the eight rationales supporting avoidance of uncomfortable teaching, protecting parent agency served both avoidant and proactive goals. Other rationales, less tied to parental opinion, also supported avoidance.

**Avoidance rationale five: Students were unaware of difference and/or inequity.**

Anne, Nora, and Laurel expressed the belief that their students were not aware of racial and ethnic differences and/or inequity, bias, or discrimination. They based avoidance on this assumed student ignorance, concluding that it was therefore inappropriate to teach them these topics. Here I will document participants' beliefs about students' awareness. I will also explore students' comments and artwork that showed evidence of awareness of racial and ethnic difference and inequity, evidence that participants overlooked in drawing their conclusions. Students' supposed ignorance of race, ethnicity, and inequity (and that therefore they shouldn't be taught these topics) was a dominant theme of discussion throughout our meetings and became an obstacle to rich teaching about these topics.

Anne felt that her students weren't noticing the racial and ethnic differences in characters' portrayed in the stories read by participants. One story she referred to was not a published book with an illustration for each page, but a text copied from the Teaching Tolerance website with just one illustration, so it was more difficult for students to discern ethnic differences. However, the Latinx character was described as speaking Spanish and referred to her grandmother as "abuela." These clues to ethnicity could have been used by Anne to point out the characters' ethnic differences. In the following excerpt from meeting four, she reads from her post-read-aloud field notes about a story with one White and one Latinx character,

But they really didn't get, for some reason, the difference so much, or the diversity in this story. So, I [wrote], "I really tried, but I didn't get many of them to really get it. I asked, "Why did the author make them different colors?" but it truly went over their heads.

Like, they, one of them said, "because they wanted... because of Martin Luther King!"

One of them actually said, "this must have happened after Martin Luther King because they're different colors."

When Anne stated that these differences "went over their heads," she seemed to dismiss the kind of awareness demonstrated by this subsequent student statement about historically segregated schools. (The story was read shortly after lessons around Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Day.) In concluding that no students "got it," she gave herself permission to ignore the one revealing comment as well as to avoid instilling awareness. The tendency of participants to not "hear" the talk around race and ethnicity students did engaged in, or to give it significance, reinforced the belief held by Anne, Nora, and Laurel that their students were unaware of these subjects, or were even colorblind.

Anne's belief in students' lack of awareness of racial and ethnic differences pre-dated the intervention. Margo had described her feelings, at age six, of ethnic isolation around her physical mismatch with Barbie dolls. Anne then described an incident that happened previously in her class when she received new, multicultural baby dolls for the students,

Well like you said, there are more dolls now that are representative of what they look like. Last year here one of our teachers at our school got a grant, and she got all the kindergarten classes dolls that were--so we all have four dolls, one is brown, one is peach, one is tan, and one is, like, beige. You know, [giggling] there are four that are supposed to look like an Asian, a Hispanic, a bl---, an African American, and a White, Caucasian baby. So we have those in the classroom for them to play with. And they gave them all names, and it was funny because their names had nothing to do with anything except, I don't know if any of you, Mr. S. is our social worker, and he's this big African American man and when we took out the little, tiny brown baby, they named it Mr. S\_\_\_. [laughter] So, other than that—which he thought was hysterical, and his first name is E., so now his name is E.—but other than that one, they didn't even relate-- It doesn't even matter, they all play with all of them. Like it doesn't matter. I don't see the Asian students playing with that baby, or--they all play with all of them. It just happened to be the one they named E. because of him, but that was it. So I think there's more out there today for kids to relate to.

Anne first struggled with what terms to use referring to the race of the baby dolls, calling them by their colors then more typical ethnic designations, then by more formal designations. This seems indicative of discomfort that sheds light on why she choose to use “peach and brown” in other contexts. Secondly, she maintained that the naming of the ethnically different dolls was

purely coincidental or “had nothing to do with anything,” except for the Black one. She then implied that the naming of the Black baby after one of the few African American men in the building was merely humorous, not racially demeaning to the man. Students did not name the White baby after a White teacher. Singling out the Black baby for racially-specific naming indicates that students had a sense of difference around Black skin only. Anne did not feel this was odd, but did find the contrast between the “big” Black man and the “little, tiny” doll funny. She ended the anecdote by saying that the naming “just happened” as if it was a coincidence and by tying the incident in to the benefits of multicultural materials.

Anne reported that students did not notice racial or ethnic differences in the books read aloud by participants, contrary to evidence from her students. Because of her assumption of their ignorance, she felt uncomfortable prompting them to notice differences. In meeting three, Anne expressed discomfort with prompting students to comment on race when reading the book *Yo! Yes!*, but then quoted a personal connection made by a student about race,

And they really never noticed the color of the boys. That just, it didn't come up until I had to actually pull it out of the conversation. Because the conversation wasn't going anywhere. It just wasn't going where I needed it to go, I guess. They were just noticing the emotion. Like, “look at their faces in this picture. He looks angry, and he looks scared.” Or, “he looks happy.” But there was never anything about what they looked like physically. That was one thing I noticed. Some typical or notable responses: One said, “My best friend is brown. I'm not, but he's still, my best friend.”

This was an example of a student considering his own personal experience with racial differences. Anne felt she had to “pull” to extract comments on the topic, but the result of her prompting was relevant, contributed to the class conversation around race and personal

relationships, and moreover demonstrated that the student was aware of their racial and ethnic differences with their peers. Here, during meeting six, another similar situation occurred during which Anne described students' lack of verbalization around skin color in two books about characters of color, followed by an insightful student comment demonstrating keen awareness of race and racism,

Well, I know when I read *Last Stop on Market Street*, but the color of the skin never came up, of them [the characters]. In fact, the only person who they commented on was the 'painted man' they called him. The guy with tattoos. The conversation was more about, I guess it was socio-economic, because it was more about being poor than it was what color they were. Especially in this picture because they weren't all brown, or White, or peach. They didn't say much about that, so. And only one person noticed it in this book [*Something Beautiful*, in which all the characters are African American], when they talked about that first page where they see "die." And I had it covered up like this, and then I said to them, where it says, "There's writing on the walls of my building. On the front door someone put the word," and I... they read it actually. And one of them was like, "Huh!" [gasps]. And then we had a long talk about "die," and then only one, it took a little while, maybe a minute, and then one student said, "Maybe there's dangerous animals behind there and if you go in there you're gonna die." And then someone else said, "Maybe there's a bad guy hiding behind the door." And then finally, one of the little girls, who is White, said, "There's just some people who don't like brown people."

It seemed as if Anne's predetermined ideas regarding what she expected to hear from her students precluded recognizing the issues students actually raised and wanted to discuss. In addition, the process of prompting is a necessary part of scaffolding conversation on a new topic.

Nevertheless, it created discomfort in Anne. She seemed to attribute the need to prompt to students lack of awareness, despite the evidence, rather than as offering discursive practices that help student name and discuss the world around them. The question remains, however, why was Anne uncomfortable? Anne's discomfort may have been around the technique of supporting student dialog itself--having to "pull"--though according to her other statements it seems likely that her discomfort was also around the topic of race and ethnicity.

Distinct from Anne's statement that students were not seeing differences, Nora indicated she felt students saw diversity but not racial and/or ethnic conflict. While she felt her students were aware of the skin color of characters in books, she felt they did not discriminate or experience tension between classmates of different races or ethnicities. Where such a sense of conflict or tension might originate with young children was unclear. Perhaps Nora felt that awareness of inequity necessarily or likely sewed division within multiracial groups. Here, during meeting two, she used the word "loaded" to describe a feeling beyond simple awareness, a feeling of being heavy with background implications for sensitivity or tension.

Margo: Yeah, and some of the kids were like, my dad is a little darker than my mom. They just went with comparing skin colors. I don't think there were any ideas or attachment to it.

Nora: It didn't seem loaded for them at all. They seemed so naïve about all of it.

Anne: Almost oblivious.

Nora: Absolutely.

Anne: I don't know when it starts.

Margo at first described students' awareness of different skin colors as without "attachment."

Nora responded in agreement, but added the words "loaded" and "naïve," giving the discussion of skin color differences as sense of tension. Anne agreed, seeming to be agreeing with Nora in

particular, that students' are lacking awareness of racial tension. Then, Anne wondered aloud at what age awareness of racial tension arises. Naïve and oblivious implied students' immaturity around subjects of race, in contrast with Margo's more neutral statement that they lacked attachment to the idea of race. Margo seemed to suggest an openness, while Nora and Anne were hinting at children being in a different state of immaturity and ignorance almost protected from tensions.

Here, during meeting six, Nora put her thoughts about student awareness of inequity in terms of battle, bringing racial warfare into the conversation.

Nora: The embattled fight of the races just doesn't seem to be part of my students' mindset.

Laurel: That's, I've found the same thing.

Nora denied that students are aware of racial tension, and Laurel agreed. However, Nora sounded like she could have been describing not just tension by physical hostility between students, though this likely was a use of hyperbole. Her image of racial war was in line with what is an adult trope, fed by White adult racial anxiety<sup>4</sup>, not something kindergarteners would think of on their own. Nora's expectation that students might or might not see racial or ethnic differences as conflict or warfare was in itself not an age-appropriate framework. Her conflating the two different phenomenon, racial difference and racial conflict, spoke to her vision of relationships between diverse groups of people. As a result of this misconception, Nora appeared relieved that her students did not seem to know about bias, discrimination, or inequity because that knowledge could lead them to experience tension around racial differences. Seeing the mission of our group-

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<sup>4</sup> The "battle" metaphor implies an equality in power between racial or ethnic groups and a meeting on equal terms, with potential for losses on either side. In reality, racial power dynamics between groups are profoundly unequal in U.S. society at large, therefore discrimination and inequity is unidirectional.

-teaching about racial and ethnic diversity and empowerment--as equivalent to exposing children to racial conflict naturally appeared inappropriate to her. A sense of interracial tension is, in Nora's conception, something to shield young children from, therefore our teaching about inequity was also something she might shield students from.

When speaking about the book *The Skin I'm In: A First Look at Racism*, which participants decided not to read to students, Nora reiterated and clarified her previous statement. During meeting three, I asked what specifically she was objecting to,

AH: Do you mean the whole book or those two pages?

Nora: No, I sort of mean the whole idea of racism. That's what I meant in the beginning when describing how my children are responding to the texts that we've been using so far. I really feel like they are naïve to that idea.

Nora's rationale for avoidance of the topic emotionally insulated her from discomfort around rejecting what was intended to be a key aspect of our work: teaching about racism. Her perspective on our work and mission, rooted in the belief that she must shield students from awareness of conflict, was an obstacle to rich teaching. Her belief that students were unaware of racial inequity, by which she meant racial tension and division, and became a common refrain among the other White participants that inhibited their teaching as well. Laurel provided an example.

While Laurel agreed with Nora about students' lack of awareness, it was unclear if she intended to agree about interracial tension as well. In the same meeting, Laurel explained her beliefs about students' ignorance and the discomfort it gave her to teach through it,

Laurel: But I feel the same way sometimes. Is it that we're forcing them to think of it when they're ...



Anne: Yeah.

Laurel: ...not wanting... or they just don't consciously have that as a thought in their mind.

Nora: Mhm.

By awareness of “it,” Laurel may have meant simply difference and diversity, or she might have meant inequity. And did she mean that awareness of inequity brings with it racial tension and division? While her exact reference was unclear, it seems based on their avoidance behavior that both Laurel and Nora’s attitudes toward teaching about racism were that it would be unpleasant and potentially divisive, rather than being inspiring of resistance. They failed to see students’ outraged reaction to learning about injustice as sympathy and solidarity with subjects of racism, or as a step toward empowerment. Instead, participants seem to prefer preservation of the status quo in that they want to preserve students’ state of ignorance for its own sake.

While agreeing with this framework of ignorance in general, Anne made one contradictory statement, arguing during meeting two that students are aware of discrimination, even if not outwardly appearing to be: “I think they know, even if in the back of their mind, I think they are aware that there is some sort of discrimination going on, so, in some places.” In what is a rare perspective from Anne, she acknowledges that students’ verbalizations are not all that is going on in their minds. She also implies, by adding “in some places,” that inequity is somewhere else, not in students’ own locale. By shielding students from discrimination happening “here” or in their own lives, at their school, etc., Anne protected her belief in her school as discrimination-free and maintained her comfort level. While Anne’s belief in student awareness shifted somewhat during the intervention, others maintained their perspective throughout.

At the end of the intervention during her exit interview, Laurel expressed her surprise at a student's synthesis of the messages from several books. Laurel felt that at least one student was more aware of the content that had been read than she had believed--in particular, a student who wasn't typically cooperative and attentive and verbally expressive,

She's another one of my girls, like, she's a little resistant to some things, and she's a challenge in some ways. But when I called on her, like her hand went right up, and she's the one who said, "They're all about Martin Luther King's speech." And I was like, "Tell me more. What do you mean by that?" And that's when she said, "It's about being beautiful, friendships. People with brown and white skin can be friends." Just the fact that *she* said that, and she summarized it. (emphasis hers) I did not lead her to that answer, like, she connected them to his speech by herself.... When she came out with that answer, you know, well, all of the books have in common that there are about Dr Martin Luther King's message or his, his speech. I was like... And I never would have thought that it was like connecting in that way for her. You know? And that's on me for an kind of underestimating her. [She's] a little bit quiet, a little resistant to things and you know, she participates, like, when she feels like it kind of thing, and I have to redirect her a lot. But then that made me question like maybe she's paying a lot more attention than I think she is.

Laurel's surprise at the quiet student's awareness demonstrated her lowered expectations for this student to internalize the material. Laurel described the student and her general behavior as key reasons behind her reduced expectation of insight: the student was quiet, resistant. Laurel candidly explained that she did not believe the student was paying attention to the intervention read alouds and discussions. In fact, this assumption was proven incorrect, as Laurel pointed out,

because the student spoke up to reflect on interracial friendships and made a connection to the words of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. This example pointed to the assumptions teachers make about students that influence how they teach. Laurel's assumption that her student ignores directions apparently contributed to an assumption that the student ignores read alouds and discussion topics as well. But Laurel's delight at the student's insight--she described having tears of joy in her eyes and hugging the student--showed to her strong desire to have all her students learn from the material and take away key messages. In the end, Laurel questioned her initial assumption that this student wasn't listening and taking in the books and discussions. The White participants, while cognizant that what students verbalize in a large group is only a fraction of what they are aware of, mostly chose to believe in students' ignorance of race, ethnicity, and inequity, creating an obstacle to our efforts.

Margo quietly disagreed with that assumption. Margo led off her engagement with the study group with an example of her own awareness of ethnic differences at kindergarten age. In our first meeting, she spoke about her childhood wish to be more like her Barbie doll and more like her White peers. Based in her childhood experience and time as a teacher at a segregated school, Margo believed students were in general aware of racial and ethnic inequities. She described the racist comments of one student she taught the previous year, and expressed relief at her current class's harmony. In the following excerpt from meeting three, Margo expressed her belief that some kindergarten students are aware of inequity, attributing students' awareness both to discussion with their parents and to discrimination they might have seen themselves,

I feel like even though I don't think my kids feel that way, that you shouldn't be... that you should always play with whoever...but I feel like there are definitely a few who have conversations with their parents that...I don't know. I think I get a sense that they know

what's happening, or they see it, or that [they] notice the color difference, or I don't know. They just seem aware of it. I don't know if that's the way that they are feeling, but yeah.... "People didn't want to be friends because of their skin color" [quoting a student comment]. A few of them definitely seemed like they knew a lot about it. I don't know if that meant they've seen it happening where they're playing or you know.

Margo stated that she didn't believe her students had active racial or ethnic bias, but she did feel that some were aware of racial or ethnic discrimination existing in the behavior of others. Margo also believed that this class of students was not an exception. During meeting two, she gave an example of racial discrimination from a White student in her class the previous year,

There was a little girl who told her, "I don't like the way you look, I don't like your hair, I don't like the way you speak," and she really pointed it out, and when the daughter went back to tell her mother, and then she told me, "I definitely instantly took it as because she's Black," or she's African American, and they were really upset. And it was the sort of thing that happened, like conflict between the two [children] all year, and I don't feel that this year. It was... and the parent used to accuse me of things, she'd be like, "I know what this is all about," you know what I mean? [laughing nervously] So yeah. But that's where I felt, and I sort of saw that, not to make a judgment, but I saw that her daughter was really quick to pick it up because the mother was really quick to, and the grandmother whose daughter ... had gone to C. [Margo's school] as well. And apparently the grandmother was that way, causing, you know, or saying everything was racial, or she didn't get her way because of what color she was, or things like that, so. Yeah, but other than that, I don't like, I don't feel like it's happening this year.

Margo's description of the situation gave evidence for her perspective that students' are aware of difference, bias, and discrimination, some acutely. While on the surface this is an example of student awareness, there are other layers to Margo's story.

In her take on the situation, Margo attributed the student's awareness of bias to multi-generational family communication and a passed-down tendency to overestimate the existence of intentional discrimination. She did not mention the family of the White girl who made the race-based criticisms. Moreover, when Margo felt accused of anti-Black bias by the family of the girl who was harassed, she minimized the possibility that the Black family has experienced discrimination at her school in the past and, like Nora, saw the possible impact of microaggressions on Black people as probable paranoia, imagining racism where there is none. For this research, the example of the two girls is evidence of students' awareness of and participation in discrimination, but it also reveals that Margo, a little similar to the White participants, employed racial ideological tools to restore her comfort level and to shelter herself from issues around race that caused her discomfort.

Margo's observations of students awareness of racial and ethnic differences and of related inequity, however, did not seem to influence the beliefs of the White participants. In meeting two, I raised the importance of considering the feelings of participants' students of color around the read-alouds. Nora's response reflected her belief that her students of color were not mature enough to think in terms of racial or ethnic isolation,

I think like, too, so are you wondering if our students feel that same kind of sense of, "ooh, do I fit in? Do I not fit in?" Are you wondering about that? Cause I'm not sure I sense that. Because I don't sense that my children are having doubts about that, certainly not along racial or ethnic lines. I don't think that they identify that way yet. Maybe they

identify that in terms of color, but it doesn't seem to be making them feel separate, different, other. I think just a couple of mine are beginning to wonder socially, "am I making friends?" But it's more kind of a behavioral stuff that makes it so that they don't really gel as easily with others.

Nora stated that that her students don't identify around racial or ethnic groupings "yet." While she believed they were aware of color, she did not believe her students were old enough to feel left out of the majority group, despite Margo's personal evidence. When she described students who might have been feeling left out, or friendless, she gave this a different reason, "behavioral stuff." This comment raised more questions about Nora's perception of her students, but crucially for this study, it negated our ability to reflect on our work's impact on students of color. Implying that students are too immature to experience racial or ethnic isolation, despite Margo's evidence, allowed the group to shirk responsibility for considering our impact equitably.

While White participants maintained that their students were not aware of racial or ethnic differences or of inequity, the following examples of students' comments during read-alouds and discussions demonstrated this awareness. The employment of the faulty racial ideological tool of student colorblindness was a major obstacle to the intervention, even though it was contradicted by evidence participants themselves collected. Below, students' statements are described in order from early to late in the intervention. Participants might have taken any of these as confirmation that their students have background knowledge of the topics. However, most participants took these instances as exceptional, rather than indicative of the consciousness of the students as a group.<sup>5</sup> Interestingly, Margo's class demonstrated their awareness verbally earlier in the intervention than those of the White participants.

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<sup>5</sup> By referring to students who expressed insights as "advanced" or "higher-level thinkers," participants were able to deny the critical abilities of most kindergarteners. At the same time, as I

Discussion in Margo's class around the first books in our series, *All the Colors We Are* and *Two Eyes, a Nose, and a Mouth*, showed students' ability to engage with concepts of diversity and ancestry. The former book dealt with the science behind skin color and its diversity; the latter was photos and text about diverse facial features and skin tones. We developed guiding questions to support students in considering the physical diversity within their class and the scientific roots of skin color. In this excerpt from our second meeting, students notice skin color differences and similarities, as well as sharing their background knowledge of their ethnic roots.

And then they, I think, well there was this one girl who said, "Well, she looks like me," and I said, "Well, why does she look like you? And she said, "We both have blonde hair and light eyes and light skin." So they kind of were pointing at each other saying who looked like who. And one little boy who was Indian said, "I don't look like anyone," and I think I said, "Actually, I don't think I agree with you," and then one of the little girls said, "Oh! He looks like you!" And I was like, "Why do you think so?" So we were just doing it that way, and it was just a very... And then we talked about the ancestors and what was great was a lot of people knew, like, I've got Cuba, Mexico, India, Sweden, Ireland, Greece, Israel.

Students easily compared their similarities and differences during the reading. Margo's class was also well informed about their ancestral roots around the world and seemed to easily make the connection between ancestry and skin color. The students in Margo's class demonstrated that awareness of their differences was easily brought to the surface when then subject was raised and

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noted in my classroom observations of read-alouds, participants typically did not employ insightful statements by one student as a springboard to open up discussion to the whole group through strategies such as asking others to rephrase the comment, make a connection to themselves, or to agree or disagree and give a reason.

the discourse was modeled, giving them the language as tools for exploring the topic. Also, a moment came when one student noted his uniqueness within the class. His comment, “I don’t look like anyone,” may have been interpreted and responded to in several ways. Margo might have assumed he felt isolated and therefore linked him to herself through physical appearance. Perhaps she recalled feeling ethnically isolated as a child, as she told the group at our first meeting, made this assumption about her student. Alternatively, she could have taken the comment as an opportunity to talk about diversity, difference, and the experience of similarity and difference. As Margo’s young students found space and language to talk about their experiences of race and ethnicity, their own and their peers’, their awareness became more evident and pronounced.

In the next weeks, participants read aloud *The Other Side*, which takes place in a segregated town in the past (Civil Rights Era possibly). A young White girl tries to become friends with a Black girl her age, Clover, and ultimately crosses the fence dividing their neighborhoods to play with Clover and her friends. In the following student quote reported by Margo at our third meeting, “her” referred to Clover and what might happen if she had wanted to cross the fence into the White neighborhood: “And maybe her mom said ‘don’t go over there’ because she wanted her to be safe, and she wouldn’t have been safe because she was Black.” This student did not specify the danger Clover would face in the White neighborhood, though as adults, we are painfully aware of the risks. The student who spoke nevertheless has a sense of the risk of crossing boundaries between races during segregation, thereby demonstrating awareness of both race and inequity.

Participants next read the story *Gloria and Rosa Make Beautiful Music* about two friends, Latinx and White, from segregated schools, one school with and one without musical



instruments and a band program. While other participants struggled with getting the plot across, Margo's students comprehended both the disparity between the schools and equity issue, one student also understood the link to race and socio-economics. Below, Margo reported on their conversation,

They noticed the skin color, [that the girls] were different right away. They said, "the schools are different because one has instruments and money and the other doesn't. That's not fair." And then when I asked, "Why?" it was pretty interesting. One said, "Well, kids who have darker skin sometimes come from places that have less than others. It happens because they're from poor places." And I was like, whoa, okay!

Margo's students quickly identified injustice and unfair circumstances, as well as systemic and political issues regarding poverty. In addition, one student linked unfairness to race. Not only was this moment clear evidence of student awareness about our topics, it could have been a opportunity for deepening the rest of the students' understanding by building on the one child's comment. By restating or, if needed, rephrasing the students' comment to the class, or by asking other students their opinions on the comment, Margo could have grown the discussion into areas of intersectionality and structural racism. As the story characters go on to advocate to the district for funding to equip both schools with instruments, Margo's students' sense of fairness could have been the root of a discussion about empowerment and advocacy. Evidence such as this convinced Margo of her class' awareness and insight.

Nora, while noting moments of comprehension of inequity from her students, like the one quoted below, denied their awareness in general. Participants read *Sweet Smell of Roses* about two Black sisters at a Civil Rights march. During her discussion of the book, Nora used perspective taking, asking her students to use the illustrations to suggest words that characters

might have thought or said. As students developed quotes, she posted their words on copies of the book pages. The characters represented included Civil Rights marchers, onlookers, counter-protestors, a police officer in between, the girls and their mother, and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.



Figure 5. Nora's perspective-taking exercise with the book *A Sweet Smell of Roses*.

Nora reported insightful student comments during meeting five, including: angry yelling of “You can’t change the world!” from counter-protestors; “We will change the world! We need freedom, peace, love,” from the protestors; and thoughts such as concern for the girls’ safety from the police officer. Students also noticed White marchers alongside the girls and other Black marchers, as Nora described,

And then somebody threw in, “Some White people do care about Black people,” so I thought they were really looking at the pictures and trying to really parse who was feeling anti and who was feeling the togetherness. And they did notice that in some of the crowds there were Black and White people together who were fighting for the same thing and not just diametrically opposed.... They [students] really were connecting to different sides of the issue and they were trying to imagine what it would have been like to have been in a position of the sort of like the naysayers [counter-protestors] and then those who were

saying, but it is about equality; We all deserve to have that same level of fairness. And they really were understanding that and seeing that, so it was kind of nice.

Not only did Nora's student grasp the events and what they might have been like, they were able to put themselves in the viewpoint of the actual participants in the events and demonstrate understanding of racial bias and animosity.

Anne also used the perspective-taking approach to this book. Some of her students' comments included, from counter-protestors: "Black people don't deserve to march!" "We don't want you here." "We want all peach [White]." Marchers in the illustrations were thought to be saying: "Martin Luther wants peace." "Black people are the same as you," "Stop, we just need to live in peace and harmony." Like Nora's students, Anne's class clearly understood the perspectives of the opposing actors in the Civil Rights Era. The mode of presentation--perspective taking with visual cues--supported successful verbalization of students' concepts. Further examples of awareness of difference, bias, and discrimination, some of which follow, offer more evidence.

The following excerpt came from Laurel on reading a book about a contemporary Black girl living in a low-income and run-down neighborhood who had graffiti on her apartment building door. During meeting six, Laurel reported,

Cause even today when I read *Something Beautiful* I had one boy mention that maybe the word was, maybe someone painted the word on the door ["DIE"] because maybe they didn't want someone who wasn't White living in that house, like everybody else in the area was White and they didn't want the White family living there.

Laurel quoted the same student when taking on the voice of the graffiti writer,

I think that's when [student's name] brought up, "you're different than us and we don't want you here because you're different. You have a different color."

The student discussed the book in terms of maintenance of White supremacy through housing segregation. The statement indicates that the student was aware of a pattern of White residents pushing out Black residents through intimidation and harassment. This sophisticated analysis of the illustration demonstrates how deeply a young student can consider these issues, especially when given the support of a story line and illustrations.

When Margo read *The Name Jar*, a story about a young Korean immigrant at her new school, a student made an ethnicity assumption based on the character's physical appearance. Several participants throughout the intervention indicated that students did not notice or point out race or ethnicity of characters without prompting, but in this case one did with only the general prompt, "what do you notice?" Notes from my classroom observation of the read-aloud show this,

Margo: "What do you notice about the girl?"

A White girl responds, "She looks like a Chinese girl." Several others raise hands and describe the actions the character appears to be making. Margo says, "Go back to what [the first student] said. She's not Chinese, but she is Korean." A different White girl calls out, "Like gangnam style!"

A second student made a cultural connection from pop culture that indicates background knowledge. During the story, the character is teased for her Korean name, and as a result she considers taking an typically American-sounding name instead. Two of Laurel's students reflected on the character's motivation,

"She feels not good because she's not the same, and they might laugh at her."

“She wants a name like American kids.”

The first excerpt showed a student comprehending the dilemma of being different than the “norm” or the mainstream (White) group. The second comment shows awareness that the teasing the character suffered was based in ethnicity and cultural “outsider” status as an immigrant with a Korean name. The assumption that “American” names are typical mainstream (White) names was implicit in the comment. The above excerpts showed awareness of the typically negative treatment of ethnic difference in our culture. They were representative of a generally higher level of awareness among participants’ students than the argument of ignorance assumes.

Students were aware of themes we hoped to get across, and increasingly so as the intervention continued on with more books and discussions. Students’ comments included developing their concepts around skin color and ancestry, giving their opinions about fairness and inclusion, making cross-cultural connections, taking on the perspective of characters around bias and discrimination, and conveying their background knowledge about racism as well as racism’s intersection with socio-economic status. These comments represented those students who not only were aware but were adept at verbalizing their evolving concepts. Quieter students may have been equally aware but for many reasons did not say.

Despite participants’ tendency to want to shelter students from these topics, when the end of the intervention came and it was time for the culminating student activity, they found that many students had insightful comments about race, ethnicity, and equity. Several participants expressed surprise at how much students had to say or had learned during the series of read alouds that was revealed through this activity. While these participants did not voice changed beliefs around student awareness and background knowledge, they did acknowledge that their students had “been listening” more than they had thought, attributing students’ knowledge to

what had been told to them. The culminating poster project was in fact revealing of original thinking on the students' part.

We had agreed to use a poster with cover photos of all the book we had read, including the one illustration of *Gloria and Rosa Make Beautiful Music*. I drafted and participants approved guiding questions to scaffold a student conversation about connections between the texts and themes as well as about racism and inequity in general. Below are examples of student's comments that were written on the posters or taken down in notes by the participants. (Margo did not use the set of questions that the others used, so unfortunately her students aren't represented here. At the meeting, she indicated that she had forgotten about the questions, and had just had a general conversation about the meanings of the books.) During our final meeting, Nora listed some student responses she had written down that demonstrated students' awareness,

I started it out with that central thing, saying, "What do you think it was all about? Like, why did my friend Amanda bring all these lovely books to our classroom so that we could read them?" And definitely a few of the children who are the ones who are sort of more insightful immediately, they said things like, "Everybody has different skin color and we can all play together." "You can still get together." "In the past, White and Black couldn't be together, so..."

Nora gathered comments that reflected her students' focus on interracial and cross-ethnic personal relationships. This focus matched with Nora's desire to focus on "positives" (as explored in the previous chapter) such as appreciating diversity and inclusion. In addition, through the teaching Nora did during Black History Month, her students had the historical framework of segregation to compare against their own experiences with friendships. In the final meeting, Nora reported a student comment about social change,

And then they were looking at *A Sweet Smell of Roses* and remembering that same thing, maybe laws could be made that separated people, but the laws could be changed....But then when I asked, “What do these books all have in common?” ... one boy was saying-- he was the one talking about change--he was saying that “You can make good changes.” The discussion of “change” in reference to discriminatory laws included reference to “you” or people as the change agents. This student’s comments reflected a sense of empowerment against injustice. Another student comment, also from Nora’s class, stood out because it reflected an idea not presented in any of the books we read or in the guiding questions we used, and not presented in a typical Civil Rights Era curriculum,

Oh, and this is a nice thought! “People can still change. If they think something, they can change and think something new.” One child was saying that.

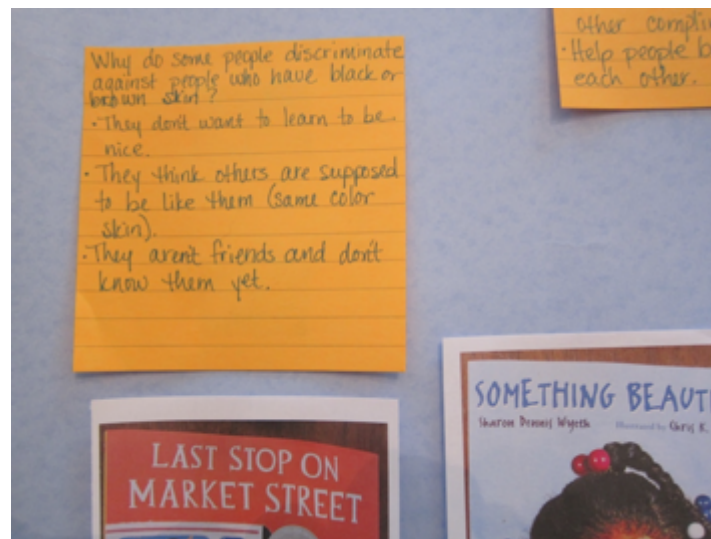
This unprompted comment addressed bias and prejudice and personal change, as distinct from the general trends of conversation Nora reported. The remark seemed to indicate that people’s biased ideas around race and ethnicity can change and develop, perhaps from biased to unbiased. This original thinking was a good example of student awareness and synthesis of ideas. Overall, Nora’s students were thinking about personal bias and interpersonal relationships and to some extent empowerment to change unjust laws.

Laurel’s students, too, focused primarily on individual bias. During her exit interview, Laurel described a shift she’d observed in her students’ thinking around fairness,

But the project, you know, the poster, being able to see all the different um, covers, I feel like that really showed me how much they really did take from the books, the messages of how everyone should be treated fairly. I think they believed that in the beginning, like I think they knew that. Um, did they know that it, that people should be treated fairly

despite the color of their skin? I don't know, I think it might've just been a like, you know, you're supposed to be nice to people, but I think you know, they all in some way to some level were able to speak to what the topics of each book or, and, and be able to say like what the real message was of the book and the overriding message was: everybody's important; everybody should be treated fairly no matter what you look like; we can all be friends.

Laurel reported that her students had gone from believing they were “supposed to be nice” to understanding of the importance of fairness and friendship despite racial and ethnic differences. According to Laurel, her students awareness at the beginning of the intervention could be summarized as having been told to behave kindly. She didn’t believe that they had linked this to race and ethnicity until late in the intervention. Below, an image of Laurel’s poster and student’s comments around the intervention reflected her students’ focus on interracial relationships as inequity.

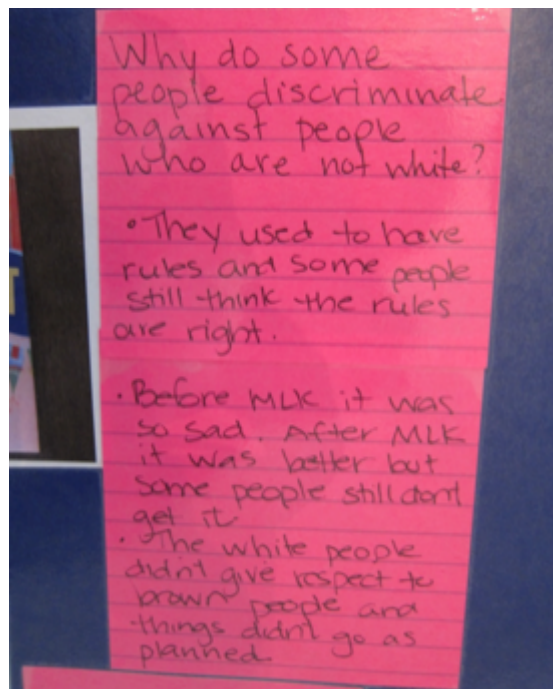


*Figure 6.* Culminating activity poster. Question: Why do some people discriminate against people who have Black or Brown skin? Answers: 1) They don’t want to learn to be nice. 2) They think others are supposed to be like them [same skin color]. 3) They aren’t friends and don’t know them yet. (Laurel’s students, meeting eight, 5/2/18)



All three reasons were genuine explanations of discrimination: Some people don't care to treat people of color fairly, some believe they are superior and others should assimilate to their ways, and some people live racially and ethnically isolated lives and hold unconscious biases out of ignorance. These students expressed in everyday, interpersonal terms their understandings of White oppression. Laurel did not teach them to answer this question in previous read-alouds; the three answers here demonstrate original thinking about the topic.

The following examples of Anne's students' answers also reflected deep thought and insight. During the intervention, Anne avoided terms and topics that she worried would upset parents and that made her uncomfortable. She most often believed her students were not reflecting on race and ethnicity, and she expressed feeling relieved. Nevertheless, her students actually had the most to say of the groups about inequity and racism. The first question below is the same one Laurel's students addressed, rephrased somewhat,

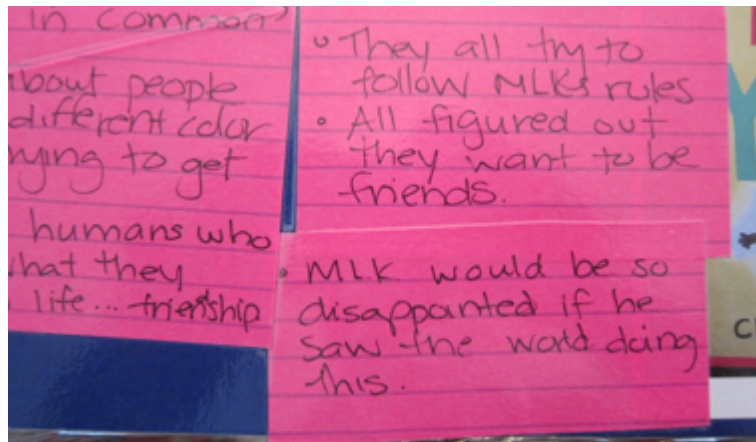


*Figure 7.* Culminating Activity Poster. Question: Why do some people discriminate against people who are not White? Answers: 1) They used to have rules and some people still think the rules are right. 2) Before MLK it was so sad. After MLK it was better but

some people still don't get it. 3) The White people didn't give respect to the Brown people and things didn't go as planned. (Anne, meeting eight, 5/2/18)

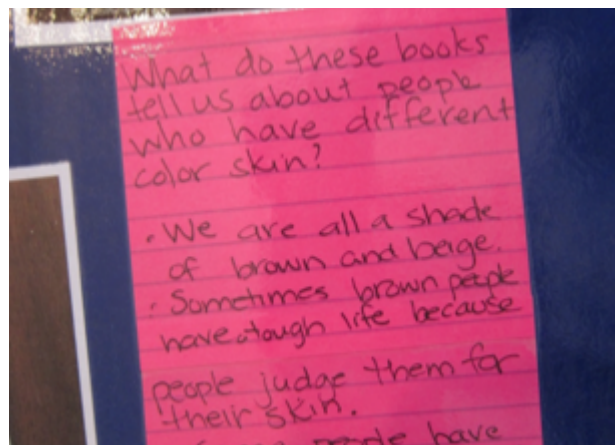
The first answer was another explanation for discrimination, that some White people are still deeply prejudiced and believe that times were better when there was legal discrimination against people of color. For other White people, the belief that racism has lessened or disappeared from society is strong. The student author of the second quote, however, knows that this is not true. The statement that "some people still don't get it" demonstrated an awareness of contemporary racism in wider society. The third answer is both general and interpersonal: "Respect" could mean being unbiased or giving fair treatment or both. The expressed belief that discrimination stems from disrespect is a thoughtful assessment. This statement appears to be a reference to historical racism, though it implies some unsuccessful effort at change that might have had consequences for present-day discrimination. Evident in these three quotes was student awareness of not only the existence of racism but of its dynamics, sources, and consequences.

The next question Anne asked, "What do these books have in common?" drew out more answers about friendship and interracial relationships, showing that these students identified with messages of interracial inclusion. One quote in particular demonstrated awareness of race, ethnicity, and equity issues as well as showing background knowledge of the state of equity in the wider social context. Students in Anne's class had heard about and identified with Dr. Martin Luther King's messages about racial justice, and they connected them to these readings with regularity. Here, a student imagined his response to today's world,



*Figure 8.* Culminating Activity Poster. Question: What do these books have in common? Answers: 1) They all try to follow MLK's rules. 2) All figured out they want to be friends. 3) MLK would be so disappointed if he saw the world doing this. (Anne, meeting eight, 5/2/18)

The student was referring to inequity in our contemporary social context, viewing that through an historical frame. The statement shows the student's ability to take in a message from her teacher about historical injustice and compare it to her knowledge of injustice today. The synthesis of ideas is mature and points to how much critical thinking students this age are able to accomplish with scaffolding. This student has greater awareness of the topic and background knowledge than participants initially attributed to students. Below, another student suggested that racial and ethnic prejudice is a root of inequitable obstacles in the lives of people of color,



*Figure 9.* Culminating Activity Poster. Question: What do these books tell us about people who have different color skin? Answers: 1) We are all a shade of brown and

beige. 2) Sometimes Brown people have a tough life because people judge them for their skin. 3) Some people have no love in their heart. 4) If there's a new kid, let them join in. (Anne, meeting eight, 5/2/18)

Comment two demonstrated a conclusion that synthesizes different messages about race and ethnicity, both taught and not taught in the classroom, to reach a mature understanding about racism. "Judge them for their skin" likely refers to racial and ethnic prejudice. "A tough life" indicates hardship at the hands of prejudice of "people," presumably White people. It is not clear if the student means individual acts of discrimination accrue obstacles for people of color, or if this is a reference to larger forms of structural racism, such as housing segregation or criminalization, etc., that create pervasive race-based hardship. The awareness of both racial/ethnic differences and of inequity was clear, and the student had developed this more detailed and nuanced concept based on Anne's teaching, yet beyond it.

In addition to understandings of racial and ethnic inequity, students demonstrated understandings of the concept of culture in response to *The Name Jar*, the book about a Korean girl who immigrated to the United States and ultimately kept her Korean name. This question was asked for the culminating poster activity: "Names are very important. Why is it important to be proud of yours?" Answers reported by Anne included, "Your name is your culture and our culture is who we are, so don't go against your culture," and "Loving who you are is being proud of your culture." While some participants reported that they struggled with teaching the concept of "culture," Anne apparently had some success, as her students' comments demonstrated. While a limited vision of "culture," naming and pride represent an introduction and a place from which to evolve their understandings. Students were able to recall this interpretation that Anne offered them and to rephrase it in their own ways. In general, participants' students showed more consciousness of culture than they had expected.

The rationale that kindergarten students are not aware of racial and ethnic differences and/or inequity was already called into question by student comments early in the intervention. By late in the intervention, after some discussions with students that were scaffolded using related literature, it was clear that students knew about these topics through background knowledge and could utilize novel information to express analytical views on the topics. Nevertheless, some participants held onto the idea that students weren't aware and therefore shouldn't be taught certain topics. The belief that students were unaware of race, ethnicity and inequity--and that this was a positive state--was an obstacle to rich teaching about these topics as well as to student empowerment to resist inequity. Participants' beliefs around the positivity of student ignorance are explored below.

**Avoidance rationale six: Naiveté as beneficial.** When participants cited student ignorance of racial or ethnic inequity as a reason for not teaching about uncomfortable topics, such as racism, they described their students or children in general as naive, innocent, open-minded, or blank slates and that this was good. Participants echoed a long-standing stereotype of children as pure, innocent, and unstained by mature ideas. As evidence of innocence, participants pointed to the phenomena of students' tendency to play with children of any background whose interests coincide with theirs, as well as their students lack of verbalization around difference and inequity. Because of students' supposed innocence, they played together as equals and thought of everyone as the same, a beneficial state for all their students. Below I will document the innocence assumption, the intent to protect this supposed state, and participants' belief that it was beneficial. During meeting six, Laurel subscribed to the assumption of innocence,

I've even had a few conversations with colleagues, not related to this group but other social justice activities that we've done, and sometimes the question has come up, "Well, do we need to make them aware of this issue in such a strong way now?" Let them have their innocence, almost? Because they are eventually going to be hearing about it and learning about it. Because they're so young.

Laurel not only states her belief in temporary innocence, but almost laments students' eventual and inevitable exposure to issues of inequity. This rationale contributed to her consideration of avoidance of the topic. In the same meeting Anne and Nora, too, expressed sentiments about purity of childhood,

Nora: And I have to say, I wonder about that, as an educator: Do I want to bring this up to them if they're coming to the table with a naivety that seems to be very pure and perhaps healthy. I don't know, naivety can sound like a negative, but it can also be a place of empowerment for children to really feel that there aren't differences. So I think I, I'm grappling with that.

Anne: I agree.

Nora deeply contemplated her choices and motivations as an educator. She appeared to genuinely believe that thinking we are all the same, or embracing common humanity while being ignorant of the differential treatment of people of color is empowering for students. Nora seemed to also feel that ignorant students are empowered to be equitable when they "don't see" or ignore difference. Perhaps Nora means students don't see differences in common humanity, rather than differences in how people are treated. Nevertheless, when Nora chose to preserve students naive state, she ensures that they also will not recognize unequal treatment around them, and will not be empowered to make social change. Belief in students' colorblindness allowed participants to

therefore feel comfortable ignoring the benefits of teaching about the topics of race and ethnicity, also keeping themselves safe from parent backlash.

Not only was color-blind benefits a racist argument, but the belief in children as “blank slates,” expressed here by Anne during our last meeting, is faulty,

I really have to say I wasn't surprised with the openness that the kids had, because they really are like blank slates. Um, like, they're just, they just don't see it. So, which makes me happy actually.

When Anne uses the word “openness” she refers to the supposed color-blindness of students. Anne links students’ “openness” with their ignorance of racial and ethnic difference. Then, she implies they have no background knowledge to bring to interactions with peers. The blank-slate theory seems to contradict a teachers’ training about and experience with the development of young children; Even young students come to class with background knowledge that may or may not be obvious to their teacher. Student learning in fact follows not the “empty vessel” model, where inputs from the teacher are banked for future application, but an interaction between their background knowledge and their action upon a dynamic environment (Freire, 1970). Because of this seeming contradiction between participants experience with teaching and children and their stated beliefs about how they learn, it seems likely that teachers knew better but were defaulting to the color-blind theory and belief in students’ innocence as a remedy for their own discomfort around our topics. This fall back to beliefs about children that are incorrect but non-threatening was one serious obstacle to teaching about inequity for the purpose of empowering students to resist unfair treatment of people of color, one another or themselves.

The rationale that student naiveté was good was another means to avoidance and an obstacle to our work. Participants’ insistence on student ignorance and innocence fits with their

expressed belief that topics about race, ethnicity, and inequity should only be discussed if students raised them first and on their own, in other words the emergent-only or “it should come from them” rationale.

**Avoidance rationale seven: Topics should be emergent.** Not only did participants believe students do not have the awareness to discuss race, ethnicity, and inequity, they also had an seemingly reflexive desire that the topics we addressed be emergent from student conversation. Participants all reported feeling constrained in making certain statements to their students without them “saying it first.” According to these two beliefs, students would not able to raise topics that they are not yet aware of, so our topics would never have been discussed. The roots of this sentiment were only described vaguely as a kind of gut feeling about developmental appropriateness.

Based in progressive pedagogy, emergent teaching calls for students to lead the way in demonstrating interest and readiness to learn. However, a topic or skill being emergent is only one part of this theory. Upon observing students’ readiness, teachers are trained to “scaffold” their students’ learning by engaging their “zone of proximal development” (ZPD), the space between what they already know or can do and the next ability that is just within reach with a little guidance (Vygotsky, 1978). Scaffolding and emergent teaching combined are an excellent approach to teaching in many areas. This would also have been an excellent approach to teaching about our topics of race, ethnicity, and equity. However, participants seemed reluctant to engage students’ ZPD by providing some novel information to help students make the next connection or conceptual leap. Instead, participants waited for students to demonstrate complete prior knowledge of these topics before teaching about them.



Participants comments revealed unclear or unrealistic expectations from student verbalization. Teaching techniques they withheld while waiting for students to lead conversation included pointing out key themes in books or asking more inequity-specific guiding questions. This hesitance added to obstacles previously described: that younger students don't verbalize as much and that participants ignored evidence of student awareness around these topics to believe in their color blindness and/or innocence. In this example from Margo's introductory interview, she described a discussion about *Amazing Grace* in which a Black girl is turned down for the role of Peter Pan at school. Margo's students spoke about fairness and race without making that next comment that racial discrimination is wrong, which Margo waited to see if they would say on their own,

They said, "Oh, that's not nice." But I don't think anyone said specifically why, they just said, "They can't tell her just because she's Black." I didn't get anyone to really say why. I wanted it to come from them. I didn't want to say it myself. I was just like, why isn't that nice? They said, "It's just not fair." Yeah, cause I definitely wanted to say, that isn't right, you shouldn't choose someone based on, I guess, how they look, but I also wanted to get them to say it, see if I could get them to come to that realization rather than me telling them.

Margo reported that she wanted them to say "why," but if "because she's Black" isn't enough of an answer, what is? Students said that rejecting someone because of their skin color isn't fair. It seems that Margo was hoping her students would phrase this as she did: "It isn't right, you shouldn't choose someone based on ... how they look." This statement of Margo's was very similar to what students did say, but in more words. She also avoids direct mention of race or ethnicity, instead saying "the way you look." She avoided mentioning race, when it was clearly

the topic, even among our group. During teaching of the book, rather than scaffolding a more complete statement of the students' ideas, Margo felt constrained in what she could say to extend their thinking, most likely because the topic was racial inequity.

Later, in discussion during meeting two, Margo generalized her experience with *Amazing Grace* to teaching books about racial and/or ethnic inequity in general, "I do agree in a lot of ways with just reading and seeing where they go with the conversation. I think they will definitely point out that it's unfair and it will come up, but I do really like just reading most books and just seeing how they interpret it." Margo's teaching strategy described here precludes guiding conversation toward the themes of books or the "take-aways" she might wish students to internalize. For our work, this meant missing out on key opportunities for anti-racist teaching. Margo was not the only participant to mention wanting children to "say it first" in response to books and discussions on our topics.

Anne, Nora, and Laurel also reported that they felt more comfortable with students initiating talk around racial and/or ethnic inequity. This ceding of leadership in teaching by participants was a means--most likely unconscious--to avoid uncomfortable teaching or confronting inequity with students. Another obstacle was resistance to talking about bias for fear young students would then enact bias or discriminate among one another.

**Avoidance rationale eight: Fear of instilling bias.** Participants also pointed to a fear of how students might employ new information about bias and discrimination. They felt that a possible outcome would be the addition to their social behavior of racial insults, teasing, and/or exclusion. Participants hesitated to teach about these topics out of concern for students' relationships with one another and for the feelings of students who might have become targets. This hesitation at times inhibited their messages to students about bias and discrimination and

revealed a lack of confidence in their students' ability to process and comprehend complex information.

Nora, for example, voiced two specific concerns around bringing information about discrimination to her students. During her introductory interview, she said, "I just get worried that it would turn into a pejorative kind of noticing of differences." Nora was concerned that comparing would turn into teasing based in race/ethnicity. Secondly, Nora stated concern about potential loss of community and sewing racial or ethnic division as a result of learning about inequity on that basis: "Personally, I don't want to bring to them the notion of any kind of 'us and them' feelings." Her fear of instilling biased behavior assumed that students were too immature to appreciate the seriousness of teasing or bad treatment of others based in race/ethnicity. Laurel, quoted below from her introductory interview, explained in detail her concerns around how students might misuse certain information,

Um, I feel like every year I worry about their reaction because my guess goes toward the negative, that they're going to be like, they're going to then start thinking, "Oh, you're different because of this, so..." [and] "people used to think [biased ideas] so we're..."

Not that they would adopt that way of thinking, but they're so young and impressionable.

So I always worry that it's going to cause problems.

Laurel first suggested that student thinking might shift toward bias, then she denied that her students might really become racially or ethnically biased. She attributed any "problems" or incidents of discriminatory behavior that might arise to students being immature. This vision of children echoed the rationale that students might misunderstand or misconstrue participants' teaching. But in this variation, participants worried about students' learning about discrimination, understanding the implications accurately, and adopting the behaviors.

However, as Laurel herself stated during the interview, most students in fact respond to hearing about racism with incredulity and condemnation,

But, um, my hope, and what I feel like I've seen, is that they're just like, "I can't believe that!" "That's awful!" They just look at it at the feelings part of it and the reality part of it, or not understanding, like, "Why would it be that way?" "I don't get it. It's just your color." But I do worry when I bring it up that it's either going to segregate them or make them be like, "Well, you know, people long ago felt this way, so maybe there's not anything wrong with it."

Laurel worried despite her own experience. The powerful discomfort around talking about these topics to children led participants to fear students' prejudice rather than have faith in students' critical thinking abilities. Even as students work through and experiment with concepts around race and ethnicity in order to fully understand them in their own context, teachers must demonstrate the faith that students' exploration is not indicative of inherent biases. Participants additionally seemed to lack confidence in their own teaching abilities when it came to these topics, anticipating student misunderstandings, confusion, and racist misdirection. All this anxiety, rationalizing, and avoidance undermined the ability of participants to act according to their convictions and ideology.

## **Conclusion**

The eight rationales represented ways participants' discomfort with teaching about racial and ethnic inequity manifested as reasons to avoid fulfilling the mission of the study group. Participants' employed these rationales to avoid teaching certain content and to teach more circumspectly around race and ethnicity topics. The multitude of rationales for avoidance expressed by participants itself pointed to deep discomfort with the topics and a need for

justification within themselves as well as validation from one another. This group dynamic--reinforcing one another's rationales--had the effect of depleting the intervention of its full potential effectiveness. At the same time, participants were left comfortable with both their level of participation and their safety from backlash and upsetting the status quo.

Nora shared in this rationalization process while also scrutinizing her rationales, motivations, and reasoning. When asked in a culminating focus group session what she had feared about joining the intervention, she described her internal struggle around avoidance of discussing racism with students,

Maybe one of my fears was the expectation that we would need to get really explicit about racism with the children. And, um, I think in the beginning I was nervous about that. And my gut instinct was saying I didn't really want to do that. And I still kind of grapple with that a little, because in general I think in life it's silly to stick one's head in the sand. That doesn't really make sense. You know, like if you don't talk about birth control, that's great, nobody will get pregnant. But okay we all know that that's not true. So, um, where do I stand on that with speaking about racism with children? And then with that book that we all decided not to read, how that really came up. How we all really felt like, "ooh, just something about this doesn't feel right." So I'm grateful that we weren't pushed to do something that we weren't comfortable with.

Her comparison between sex education and racism education was revealing. Nora appeared to be aware that she stuck her "head in the sand," as if not teaching about racism could make it not occur. She reduced the decision around not reading *The Skin I'm In* to a feeling, described as a "gut instinct," which was really White discomfort. Thinking aloud in a detached manner, she attempts to be objective about her considerations.

Perhaps her feelings were more raw and candid earlier, at meeting three, while discussing the book; Nora described one of her rationales against reading the book to her class, then stated, “I don’t know. I don’t know. Maybe I’m just being afraid.” Fear was a key factor in the group’s work for all the participants, and for me as facilitator. For each of us, the fear was of parental discomfort and backlash, but for those of us who are White, it was also of our own discomfort. This fear was lodged in the power for disruption that the topic of racial and ethnic inequity holds in our society as well as within our self images. Fear in this case also created a complex example of the power of rationalization. This rationalization ability became a major obstacle to performing our task and realizing our goals.

## Chapter Seven

### Conclusions

In this concluding chapter, I seek to summarize and apply what I have observed and learned from conducting a design-based research (DBR) intervention with teachers participating in a PLC to implement an anti-racist curriculum. I will suggest improvements to the intervention for use by teacher-participants, facilitators, and researchers. The improvements described below will ultimately be incorporated to produce a guide to the intervention for future users as an outcome and product of the DBR, and it is my hope that users will continue to be improved it in future iterations. This chapter begins with reflections on the findings.

#### **Reflections on Findings: What Does Being White Have To Do With It?**

Examining the data, I found differences between the three White participants and Margo, the sole participant of color. Differences included, 1) the number and variety of rationales employed for avoidance, and 2) evidence of unconscious assumptions about the race or ethnicity or their students. As I have noted, my sample was extremely small. I do not have incontrovertible findings regarding these differences. Nevertheless, the observations I have made are potentially relevant for future research, and so are worth noting.

While the three White participants described many rationales for avoidance, Margo, the participant of color, primarily and consistently expressed two: fear of parent backlash and deference to parent agency around the topics. When Margo objected to the book *The Skin I'm In* she described her fear of angry parents lashing out on social media and the local news. She did not point to her own discomfort with the material or with the term. Margo rarely commented on the other rationales expressed by the White participants. Anne, Nora, and Laurel, on the other hand, took a scattershot approach to rationales for avoidance. When I attempted to address one

concern, for example by providing research on awareness of race from infancy on, they would raise another variation of this concern. This could be seen as attempts to account for their generalized discomfort with confronting racism directly. Anne, Nora, and Laurel also showed a tendency to intellectualize their discomfort and attribute it to outside sources, such as a book or a term, rather than to look inward. This is one key difference.

In addition, I noticed unstated and probably unconscious assumptions about the race and/or ethnicity of participants' students in participants' goal statements. For example, Laurel described a Black friend abused by White police officers, and then stated that she hoped none of her students would leave her class "thinking that behavior is alright." She did not say she hoped her students would not experience racial profiling. Since a Black student would presumably already know that this was not right, Laurel is concerned here primarily with her White students' potential biases. Nora and Anne also described reducing students' bias as their goal. Appreciation of commonality and diversity are concepts that target the students most likely to develop bias or to discriminate based on race and ethnicity, the White students. White participants, who taught majority-White classes, were most focused on teaching to their White students, when it came to our intervention.

In contrast, when Margo spoke about her goals for her students, she described wanting them to know what to say or do should they experience or witness discrimination. Implicit in this wish are both White students and students of color. It may simply have been that the White participants taught to the average student of their class, while Margo was more conscious of the diversity of her students and teaching to them all. Additionally, Margo was the only participant to raise the topic of how students of color specifically were being affected by our curriculum: She observed that they were especially quiet during the read-alouds we implemented, but felt



unable to determine why or what they were experiencing. I raised this topic at other points, but it was either dismissed or met with uncertainty. One White participant, Nora, commented that students of color did not appear to be feeling that they didn't "fit in." This suggests that Nora interpreted my concern as being around students of color feeling isolated from the majority. In fact, students may have felt spotlighted by discussion of racial or ethnic discrimination or inequity, or a range of related emotions. We can't actually know, because we failed to consistently reflect on this. In general, we demonstrated a lack of consideration of teaching to children of color specifically. These observations point to two ways White teachers in general may approach teaching about race and ethnicity that differs from teachers of color.

This variation suggests that different racial identities among participants could contribute to a different pattern around avoidance and potentially a more inclusive approach to students. The composition of such a small study group is likely an important variable in the outcomes and findings. This study group, being three-fourths White, made some avoidant decisions. A study group with more than one or two members of color would perhaps operate differently. Three questions for further study become apparent from this observation: One, how would a more multi-racial/ethnic study group operate differently in relation to anti-racist material and avoidance? Two, how would this differently composed study group teach students differently? Three, would that difference have a more beneficial effect for students?

Research on White teacher PD is important largely because of the racial and ethnic cultural disconnect between most teachers and most students and the need to figure out how to bridge the gap. Nevertheless, study of diverse teacher groups is also vital, because ideally we may learn from the variation in perspectives how to teach diverse students. We may also learn how the voices of teachers of color are subsumed and suppressed in mixed-race groups, and how

to counteract this to achieve teaching from diverse perspectives for diverse student groups. The topics of race, ethnicity, and equity specifically are challenging in several ways for teachers to address in the classroom, yet differences in how diverse teachers navigate the obstacles warrant further study.

### **Implications**

The findings explored previously have multiple implications for researchers and educators. Below, I first reflect on implications for educational research. Because the intervention was the first run-through of what ideally should be an iterative process, improvement of the PD has been a crucial focus of my investigation. I discuss implications for teacher education programs and for PD second. Last, I looked at implications for K-12 classroom teachers who will hopefully implement classroom critical literacy read-alouds and may even implement the PD intervention with themselves in a leadership role.

***Implications for educational research.*** The process of rationalization as part of White resistance to enacting anti-racist work in the classroom, as described in this study, is an underexamined area in educational research. However, looking in the literature of the counselor preparation field, resistance to coursework on multicultural competence and social justice issues is described and considered. Sherry Watt wrote in 2009 about privileged identity exploration (PIE) that occurred when counseling students engaged in difficult discussions around social justice issues such as racism. When taking part in conversations that triggered self-reflection and cognitive dissonance around their beliefs, Watt's students engaged in resistance strategies that included rationalization and intellectualization, often hindering their own learning process (Watt, 2009). Watt defined rationalization as White students defending their views "by presenting reasons that do not require exploration of the roots of injustice" (p. 98). This defensive strategy

served to protect students' racist (or sexist, homophobic, or ableist) concepts and thereby their privilege.

The cognitive and emotional processes that Anne, Nora, and Laurel enacted were comparable to Watt's students: both groups maintained their privilege by finding discursive means to deny their racial and ethnic biases and privileged decisions. With my participants, however, their personal ideology around anti-racism was a mismatch for their decisions on the classroom actions they were willing to take. The cognitive dissonance that arose in the facing gap between beliefs and actions resulted in discomfort, which provoked rationalization. This particular feature of this study—that the so-called liberal or progressive White participants engaged in avoidant rationalization similar to White educators with more conservative beliefs—could be a phenomenon worthy of investigation. While it is possible that these teachers have promise and potential to grow into an actively anti-racist role in the classroom, their rationalization processes must be better understood to be counteracted.

I wish to consider here some key critiques of theories of resistance among White education students. Gay & Howard (2000) point out that not only are most k-12 teachers White and middle-class, but the teacher education professors are also mostly White, and they have limited experience in multicultural classrooms, too. The authors ask, how can *they* teach what *they* don't know? This calls into question whether novice teachers might not push back against multicultural education courses out of skepticism. Secondly, Karen Lowenstein (2009) critiques studies that examine White teacher education students' resistance as an impediment to learning as following a deficit model similar to stereotyped deficit models of students of color. She questions if rather than finding the novice teachers as deficient in ability to learn about diversity and equity, should the university classroom pedagogy also be examined? Lowenstein writes, "If

teacher educators hope that teacher candidates view their future K-12 students as having resources and capabilities for learning, then teacher educators must critically examine and dialogue about what they model through their own pedagogy” (p. 163). In other words, shouldn’t professors practice the pedagogy they preach?

The use of DBR for social justice work in schools also has implications researchers. “Ann L. Brown and Allan Collins first introduced the idea of DBR in 1992 in response to the critique that laboratory studies lacked ecological validity or the ability to approximate real classroom situations” (Crippen & Brown, 2018, p. 2). DBR has a “grassroots” aspect in that it is adapted for specific local needs and implemented by local practitioners experiencing the problem of practice. As Crippen and Brown describe it, “Design-based research (DBR) is a form of inquiry ... that is developed in collaboration with stakeholders and then deployed and evaluated in the rich, real-world contexts.” Practitioners are co-researchers, and their feedback on what helps or hinders experiences in the classroom endows them with a degree of a co-designer role as well while addressing problems collaboratively. Bree Picower (2011) employed DBR for her study implementing an inquiry group for novice teachers attempting social justice teaching in neoliberal educational contexts. This is a second example, in addition to mine, where DBR was used as both a local intervention for enacting social justice in classrooms as well as for generating theory about an educational phenomenon. In my experience of using DBR in this study, it appears to be is a strong methodological candidate as a collaborative social justice action tool and source of theory for future research.

***Implications for teacher education and PD.*** The finding that Anne, Nora, and Laurel avoided implementing anti-racist teaching in the classroom through extensive rationalization points to another question for teacher educators and preparation programs: how does resistance

or engagement in PD translate into avoiding or enacting their anti-racist ideals in classroom actions? Research into White resistance that generally focuses on teacher education programs fails to follow teachers into the classroom to learn if their learning improved their practice (Gay & Howard, 2000; Sleeter, 2001). In addition to investigating resistance in colleges of education, researchers need to step out into actual K-12 classrooms to find out how White teachers are implementing what they learned in multicultural education or social contexts classes. Another key question might be: are White teachers able to set aside discomfort to implement equitable teaching measures and approaches they have been taught, such as critical literacy or multicultural education? Research on implementation of anti-racists practices in classrooms could potentially benefit the students of novice or newly-trained teachers by showing teacher educators what concepts translate into practices.

Writing in 2000, Gay and Howard observed,

“It is a common occurrence for students in teacher education programs to express various forms of subtle resistance to embracing the multicultural imperative...including fear, denial of the verity of ethnic and cultural diversity in teaching and learning, and reluctance to confront issues of racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity directly and substantively” (p. 3).

This study, however, followed teachers who were already committed to the mission of promoting racial and ethnic equity through pedagogy, evidenced by volunteering to do the work. Despite their predisposition and commitment to equity, Anne, Nora, and Laurel found it difficult to set aside their resistance and follow through in the classroom.

Another finding of this study is that through early adaptations of my instructional design plans, I created some obstacles to optimal classroom outcomes of critical anti-racist teaching.

When I encountered participant resistance to activities for developing critical consciousness, I acquiesced with little push-back out of my own discomfort with disagreement. This decision, I believe, impacted our objectives. Without raising White teachers' consciousness around our topics, they naturally had a lower threshold for discomfort, which became an obstacle. The implication is that in multicultural or anti-racism PD, development of student awareness and racial constructs should not be separate from training for classroom actions. Instead, such a program should contain self-reflection and consciousness raising and continue this work throughout enactment in actual classrooms and schools.

***Implications for teachers.*** Ideally, teachers will make use of this intervention design to do similar work with their peers. I hope to provide an improved PD model for “on the ground” use through a teaching guide, produced subsequently. When applied with flexibility for local needs of students, schools, communities, and the individual teachers participating, these qualities and improvements would hopefully contribute to a beneficial anti-racist teaching program. I have many improvements to the PD model in mind, but here I describe key takeaways from the general process for teachers, and specifically White teachers, from my perspective as a teacher myself.

First, in this study, asking critical questions during and after read-alouds did support verbal expression of critical thinking by students, based in some of their comments on race, ethnicity, and equity. Including critical questions with critical book selection appears to be one way teachers can integrate social justice work into their teaching. Teachers can, and should, move deeper into implementing critical literacy through specific practices, language, and approaches to pedagogy by looking into this literature.

Implications for White teachers specifically include that they should be aware that they will need to navigate contrasting goals of changing society through their students versus protecting their comfort zones. “Comfort” is often used as a euphemism for professional opinion on educational appropriateness. However, this is a rationalization. When used in the context of anti-racist action, this term speaks to deep fears of transgression and loss of control over the power of the dialog, in my personal experience. White teachers need to expect discomfort in their work around racism and acknowledge that this is a sign of the cognitive disequilibrium that precedes ideological change. Thoughtful choices around what actions to take in the classroom need to be made through reflection and self-reflection.

All participants’ cultural competency will benefit from research into the cultures represented in the texts read to students. Teachers are ultimately responsible for what they teach and how, and therefore they should take responsibility for culture-specific research, for speaking up and objecting to insensitive texts or activities, and for adjusting their implementation as needed. In this way, cultural appropriation and stereotyping can be consciously avoided.

In this study, there was some evidence of White teachers unconsciously tailoring their instruction for White students more than their students of color, as a majority their students were White. This created a situation where student needs were not equally considered. Unconsciously leaving some students and their feelings out of consideration is a means of reinforcing White privilege. As teachers know, each student is an individual with differing background knowledge and associations. Therefore, individual students’ emotional responses must be considered when planning race and ethnicity lessons, just as individual learning styles are considered around math or language arts lessons. As part of planning read-alouds, discussion questions, and extension activities teachers should systematically attempt to anticipate emotional responses of students,

including of a variety of racial or ethnic groups in the class or of specific individuals with distinct needs. If a child has a surprising response to one read-aloud, it will benefit the student and the teacher to give thought to their reactions going forward, even to follow up with that child if appropriate. Teachers should also avoid “spotlighting” or other insensitive approaches.

Additionally, teaching with a goal of developing children to be unbiased around race and ethnicity is presumably beneficial and hopefully effective. By extension, if one assumes early-forming attitudes persist into adulthood, a teacher can over the years influence hundreds of adults who may be less discriminatory and more appreciative of diversity in their social worlds. Nevertheless, teaching to resist student biases in isolation is problematic in two ways. First, individuals who don’t discriminate still may not be actively anti-racist in their choices and resist racist social structures. Change in society probably won’t result from just hundreds of unbiased yet passive individuals. Second, this is a deficit model assuming that children need to be fixed. Children acquire racial stereotypes and biases early on, but it is because they come into and are raised in a racist society. The society itself needs to be improved so the children in it can thrive without bias. I believe setting children up to change the world may ultimately have more power than trying to fix the children so they don’t make the same mistakes others have before them.

Finally, I recommend incorporation of the concept of solidarity into the classroom philosophy and dialog, alongside empowerment. Solidarity is a coming together across differences to act collectively for collective benefit. The concept includes appreciation of diversity and human commonality, and it encompasses standing up together for the best interests of all. Solidarity is a more uniting concept than appreciation of diversity, and empowerment is a more action-oriented concept than anti-bias. Students of this type of curriculum would be



equipped with real-world tools for resisting discrimination, from the interpersonal (through inclusion and standing up for their friends) to the societal (through social critique of racist structures and collective action). By teaching around the concepts of solidarity and empowerment, all students would be addressed by and included in the curriculum equally across racial and ethnic groups, as opposed to focusing on anti-bias that applies primarily to the White children. Teaching concepts around solidarity and empowerment together is critical to nurturing active citizens and change agents.

### **Limitations**

The small size of my sample--four long-term participants who taught 20 to 23 students each--made generalization of these findings difficult. The participant sample included three White women and one woman of color. This represents some diversity, considering that the majority of teachers are White and female. However, in each of their classes the students were predominantly White. Socio-economic status of students varied by school to some degree. Nevertheless, the students reached by the intervention and targeted by the curriculum were largely homogenous and not representative of the town's students or the country's at large. In essence, this research reflects--in a general sense--what mostly White teachers teach to mostly White students around race, ethnicity, and equity. Accurate or deep insight into even this niche population requires further research to demonstrate my findings as firm conclusions.

The research setting was a diverse and self-consciously progressive community in a generally more politically liberal, less conservative region of the country. The willingness of the school district to allow and support this research was a sign of its political climate. The participants were self-selecting, which indicates that they likely held sympathetic views toward social justice education and diversity initiatives. Regarding reproducibility, implementing this

type of intervention in other locales, dependent on community politics and potentially without support and approval of the district, might have a very different result or might be impossible. Districts might not give approval; parents might protest; teachers might have to choose whether to put their careers at risk to participate. This research was designed for and is particular to its setting and sample, and therefore, again, difficult to generalize from.

A third limitation stems from the nature of the DBR researcher's multiple roles. Because one individual designs both the study and the intervention and facilitates the implementation and assesses its effectiveness, decision-making may create conflict within the researcher between the roles they are playing. Role confusion certainly impacted my decisions around participants' avoidance. I needed to choose being a researcher observing participant thinking by letting them follow their instincts or being a researcher learning what makes an effective anti-racist educational program by pushing participants to teach outside their racial comfort zones. As a researcher-facilitator, I made choices to sometimes push back (such as around *The Skin I'm In*) and other times to be passive in leadership, for example not editing participants' discussion questions and accepting unrelated extension activities. The intervention could possibly have been more effective had my leadership been more assertive, or the findings might have been more robust had I let participants lead throughout. Essentially, I had to prioritize what to learn. I could not learn it all.

## **Conclusion**

Teachers who wish to contribute to racial equity and justice in society often look to their students with hopes to influence the next generation. Education has limitless potential to shape society, we are told. However, teachers' curricular and pedagogical decisions around efforts to shape society are deeply complicated and face layers of obstacles. The literature reviewed here

showed successes in the use of collaborative PD to introduce critical literacy approaches into the classroom and address social inequities with students. Students in this and other studies made insightful and critical comments on topics teachers introduced, demonstrating their thinking and evolving ideas. This study reflects one such attempt at helping educators teach for social justice and some of the obstacles. There is much work to be done to understand how this kind of work can incorporate race and ethnicity. From the findings here, White resistance, which took the form of rationalization and avoidance of anti-racist teaching, appears to be a significant factor in the outcomes of such efforts. Despite the benefits of a critical literacy teaching approach, the read-alouds, questions, and extension activities included less explicit and specific information about inequity and racism than I would have liked. My struggle to push back against avoidance in a collaborative format of PD was revealing in itself of my discomfort with direct disagreement and my desire to accommodate others that was even greater than to pursue anti-racist action. This examination of such a process calls for further development and improvement. Further iterations of this study, as well as related research, can address the obstacles and challenges of empowering students for social critique.

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## Appendix A

## Recruitment Flyer

Amanda Hamlin / [Amandahamlin1@hotmail.com](mailto:Amandahamlin1@hotmail.com) /  
917-282-4678

**Professional Development opportunity in an  
action-research study:**

**Teaching About Race Through Critical Literacy**



**Origins of the study:** I am a doctoral student at Rutgers Graduate School of Education and an early childhood teacher of a dozen years. I hope to collaborate with a small group of kindergarten teachers from the different elementary schools and one pre-k teacher in a study about teachers working as a supportive team to teach young children about race. In my own teaching, I have found young students ready and eager to learn about issues of social justice and, with time and modeling, to be thoughtful and vocal on the topics we discuss. In the diverse and complex communities of South Orange and Maplewood, our children can benefit from developing the vocabulary and confidence to talk openly about race and equity at an early age.

**Goals:** For you to gain confidence in teaching children to think critically about race in their context and the world, as well as helping students to express and refine their thinking in discussion with one another through text-based conversation in the classroom “read-aloud.” Students will learn about diversity, to recognize inequity, and be empowered to seek fairness. Feeling safe to openly discuss their emerging concepts about race demystifies the subject and signals to children that it is not taboo or bad, but important. Having teachers listen to their ideas as they find their critical voice empowers children to be engaged with their world as valued thinkers and actors.

**Critical literacy:** Critical literacy is helping students to understand the purposes of literature and “slants” or world-views of texts, to analyze texts in comparison to their own lived experiences, and to form their own critical stance in response.

**PD objectives:** You will gain strength in guiding student group discussion around race-based topics using children’s literature as a focal point. In addition, shared facilitation of the PD sessions will build your leadership skills. The group will be small—six participants maximum, one from each school. All discussion in the group meetings will be confidential.

**Benefits:** Free picture books; snacks at meetings; new skills; benefits to your students

**Time requirements:** 60 to 90 minutes to meet every other week (after school), eight meetings total; teach seven read-alouds in your classroom; 5 to 10 minutes to take notes after your lesson; one in-class critical literacy read-aloud observed by me.

## Appendix B

## Teachers' read-aloud field notes template

Date and time:  
Teacher name:  
Read aloud title:

What are your thoughts about the impression made by the read-aloud for students?

What were some notable student responses and some typical student responses, verbal or non-verbal?

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What are your thoughts about the guiding questions you asked?

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How did you facilitate student discussion best? What was a missed opportunity to delve deeper?

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## Introductory Interview Protocol

## Interview Guide

Interviewer: Amanda Hamlin

Interviewees: teacher participants in a critical literacy study group

Timing: before initial study group meeting, late September

Duration: 30-45 minutes

Format: semi-structured interview

## Introduction:

I'm Amanda Hamlin. I'm a doctoral candidate at the Rutgers Graduate School of Education. This study group that you have joined is the focus of my dissertation and part of an action research project designed to give teachers tools to teach for social justice. My professional background is as an early childhood teacher for a dozen years, eighth of which were as a kindergarten teacher in New York and New Jersey. My goal during this interview is getting to know you, your motivation to join this project, and the background of your interest in teaching about race and equity issues. You only have to answer any question you choose. I will assign pseudonyms to the data to ensure privacy. Do I have your consent to audio record this? Thank you.

1. What is your name?

Where do you teach?

What age?

How long have you been a teacher?

2. How do you identify racially and/or ethnically?



3. What are your students like?

What is the racial and ethnic makeup of your class of students?

What are their primary spoken languages?

What is the demographic makeup of the community the school draws from?

What is the demographic match between you and your students like?

How do you believe your students perceive the racial and ethnic makeup of their class and/or school?

What have you heard them say about race and ethnicity to you or one another?

How do you think teaching about race and/or ethnicity and equity will be received by your students?

4. Have you taught about social justice issues before?

What type of teaching have you done; what format(s) have you used?

Have you used children's literature to do this, teaching critical thinking about social issues with picture books?

Has your teaching included issues of racial justice? What did that look like?

What motivated you then, personally or professionally?

What motivates you to be part of this study group now?

5. What is your perception of racial educational equity at your school and district?

6. What are your views of the role of education in perpetuating and/or challenging racial inequity?

7. Do you have anything you'd like to add?

Closing comments:

Thank you very much for your thoughtful answers. This has been so helpful in better understanding you, your teaching, and your goals for participation in our study group. I am really looking forward to meeting with all of you soon and getting our work underway. Thanks again.

## Appendix D

## First and Last Meeting Agendas

## AGENDA, 12/6/17 STUDY GROUP MEETING

1. The four agreements (Singleton): Do we agree? (10 minutes)
  2. Our artifacts on race/ethnicity and education in our lives (5 minutes each)
  3. What is RACE? What is Ethnicity? What is Racism?: read Tatum excerpt and attempt to define (we don't have to agree with one another) (10 minutes)
  4. Chalk Talk (10 minutes)
  5. Review advice on talking to children about race, ethnicity, and racism (5 minutes)
  6. Read the two books for our first lesson, what are their messages, and what messages do we hope students will take away (5 minutes)
  7. Draft guiding questions for read-aloud: What are our goals for student expression, in general? How can we model self-expression, productive disagreement, listening and learning from one another? What are our goals, or things in the text we'd like them to think about? How can we use open-ended questions to guide their attention to these things? What follow-up questions might extend their thinking. How do we know each child has had opportunity to reflect and express their ideas? How do we know when the conversation is finished? Do we need a follow-up activity to help students express themselves more fully? (10 minutes)
  8. Subsequent read-alouds: handout to take away
  9. Debrief: How do we feel about the meeting? About our first read-aloud coming up? (5 minutes)
- 75 minutes

## AGENDA: 5/2/18 STUDY GROUP MEETING

1. Reflections on teaching Same, Same but Different & Being With You This Way. Think especially about approach and strategies: How did you support insightful comments on our themes? How did you get kids talking about race/ethnicity and equity? How did you make them comfortable sharing? Did you get responses from the more reticent learners? 15 MINUTES PER BOOK; 3-4 MINUTES EACH.
2. Reflections on the culminating activity, the poster of books? Think especially about what questions you asked which brought about the most reflection on connections around our themes. 15 MINUTES.
3. Culminating focus group discussion: going around in a circle for the questions, listening to each other. I'll interrupt for timing reasons only, to share airtime and keep us moving. 45 MINUTES.
4. What's next? Consider if you can continue this work together or with others at your school/your personal network of teachers. Let me know if you need anything to facilitate this!

## Appendix E

## Concluding Focus Group Protocol

## FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS—final meeting, 5/2/18, 3:45

We are dedicating half of our last meeting to a focus group reflection on the whole process. This is to help me develop a recommended study-group process for a wider audience of teachers. This will be in the form of a “Teachers’ Guide to teaching about race/ethnicity and equity.” When it is completed, I will make sure you all get copies for use with your own study groups, which I hope you will create at your schools or more widely among your personal teacher networks, to build on your hard and thoughtful work in our group this year.

With four people and ten questions, we need to move swiftly but get to everyone’s ideas. So, we will go around the table giving each a chance to speak. If you do not have an example to share, or are uncomfortable with the question in any way, you may pass. Brief specifics are most helpful. Please mention the book title in your comments where appropriate, for the sake of the data collector (me!). Before we start, please take 5 minutes to read the list of questions and make any short notes of examples that you want to remember to speak on.

Overarching question: What worked/didn’t work about the study group process?

## YOUR EXPERIENCE

1. At the beginning of the study group, what were your goals for teaching about these topics? How has the group helped you meet your goals? What part of our work helped and how?
2. What were your fears? Were your fears realized and how? Was the group able to help?

3. Tell me about a time you brought a concern to the group. Was the group able to help with what you were struggling with?

4. Tell me about a time when something said or done at a meeting helped you to help your students “get” the material?

#### STUDY GROUP SPECIFICS

5. What did you think about the structure of the meetings? Tell me about a meeting that was especially helpful?

6. Did you use the guiding questions we developed to spur conversation with students? What type of question elicited deeper thinking and comments about our topics? For example, feelings of characters questions? Power dynamics questions? Author’s perspective questions? Characters’ perspective questions?

7. How did the extension activities impact students’ expression of ideas about race and ethnicity and equity? Which activity brought out their ideas about race/ethnicity/equity best?

8. How do you feel about the book-selection process? Were our selections as useful as you anticipated for exploring racial/ethnic equity issues with students? Tell me about a story that your felt got to the heart of our subject matter and what happened that makes you think that. Tell me about a story that “flopped” as far as our topics.

9. What strategies did you use to you make students feel comfortable sharing their personal reflections about racial/ethnic equity issues? Where did you learn this strategy?

10. What specifically could improve about the work of the group to support teachers more in this work?

### Concluding Individual Interview Protocol

#### EXIT INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

The purpose of this interview is to delve a little deeper into your opinions about the work we've done: collaboratively preparing to teach about race/ethnicity and equity issues through picture books. More than the mechanics of the study group, as we discussed in the focus group, the following questions inquire into your beliefs about the purpose and outcomes of the work. Please feel free to pass on any questions that you do not wish to answer. The information you provide will be used to inform my dissertation, cited using a pseudonym.

#### A TEACHER'S ROLE

1. How would you describe what a teachers' role should be in teaching about race/ethnicity and equity issues? Is this what you thought before the project began? How has your opinion changed since then?
2. How has your teaching of these books reflected those beliefs?
3. Would you recommend teaching about racial/ethnic equity issues to another teacher interested in such work? What advice would you give to her/him?

#### YOUR TEACHING AROUND THESE SUBJECTS

4. Do you feel better at teaching about these subjects now? How? Can you give an example of a time you felt confident about teaching this material? Was it a particular strategy, type of question, etc.?
5. Tell me about the most valuable aspect of the project to you (collaboration with colleagues, self-reflection on your teaching, preparation for read-alouds, free books, etc.)? How did this help with teaching these books/subjects?
6. What bothered you about the teaching you took part in through this project?

7. What bothered you about the study group process? For example, tell me about a time you felt uncomfortable in a meeting.
8. What struggles did you have with teaching the materials? For example, tell me about a time you felt frustrated or concerned.
9. How do you think your own racial/ethnic identity shaped your teaching about race/ethnicity and equity issues? Was there a specific moment when you felt your identity shaping your teaching? Did you ever feel uncomfortable while teaching about these topics?
10. What questions have opened up for you about your own teaching around race/ethnicity and equity?
11. What do you wish you'd learned more about regarding racial/ethnic equity in education?
12. What has been left out of this interview that you want to share about your teaching through this process?

#### YOUR STUDENTS

13. What did your kids get out of this? Tell me about a time when students' comments or artwork showed what understanding or awareness they had gained around race/ethnicity. Tell me about a time when it seem that the reverse was true, and there was little understanding or just confusion.
14. What books or conversations might have been uncomfortable or difficult for your students, some or all? Tell me about a time when you witnessed this through facial expressions, comments, unusual quietness?



15. What do you think about kindergarten children's ability to engage with race/ethnicity and equity subjects? Can you give an example, maybe a student comment that surprised or impressed you? Or the opposite? How has your opinion on this changed or not since taking part in this project?

16. What thoughts do you want to share about your students learning that have been left out?

#### LOOKING FORWARD

17. Do you think you'll continue this work in your classroom? Would you consider initiating a similar study group with other interested teachers?